

HER LIFE'S WORK

BY
LADY DUNBOYNE



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AUNT MARGARET.

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"THE MAITLANDS' MONEY-BOX," "SUMMERLAND GRANGE,"
ETC. ETC. ETC.



LONDON:

JAMES NISBET & CO., 21 BERNERS STREET.

MDCCCLXXXVIII.

CONTENTS.



	PAGE
CHAPTER I.	
INTRODUCTION: EASTER EVE	I
CHAPTER II.	
A MORNING RIDE	II
CHAPTER III.	
RAYMOND	26
CHAPTER IV.	
THE COUSINS	37
CHAPTER V.	
SUNDAY AT HOLMEWOOD	46
CHAPTER VI.	
THE EFFECT OF EXAMPLE	56
CHAPTER VII.	
SUNDAY AT HOPEDALE	64
CHAPTER VIII.	
TRUE COURAGE	71
CHAPTER IX.	
CONFIDENCES	79
CHAPTER X.	
PRECEPT AND EXAMPLE	90

	PAGE
CHAPTER XI.	
CONFIRMATION VOWS	103
CHAPTER XII.	
A FIRST BALL	110
CHAPTER XIII.	
A YOUNG SOLDIER	121
CHAPTER XIV.	
BAD NEWS	131
CHAPTER XV.	
ILLNESS AND ANXIETY	144
CHAPTER XVI.	
SUNDAY IN BARRACKS	152
CHAPTER XVII.	
LADY TALBOT	162
CHAPTER XVIII.	
FATHER AND SON	175
CHAPTER XIX.	
TERRIBLE TIDINGS	191
CHAPTER XX.	
"KILLED—IN SAVING LIFE"	202
CHAPTER XXI.	
RAYMOND'S FATHER	210
CHAPTER XXII.	
A LIFE'S AIM FULFILLED	220
CONCLUSION	226

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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION: EASTER EVE.

IT is Easter Eve—such an evening as befits our thoughts on the vigil of the Resurrection Feast—the air still and soft, full of the fragrance of spring blossoms and the song of birds. The villagers are busy decking the graves of those dear to them with primrose and daffodil wreaths, and through the open church door can be seen half-completed preparations for to-morrow's decorations.

From the little school-house hard by, comes the sweet sound of childish voices practising the Easter hymn, while near the lych-gate, apart from other listeners, a solitary figure stands, her lips joining, though almost soundlessly, in the lengthened “Alleluia.”

She is an old lady, upright and stately, and with some of the brightness of former days still shining in her dark eyes, though more than seventy years have passed over that silvered head—years fraught with more of sorrow and bereavement, than falls to the lot of many.

Her hand is resting on a white marble cross, around which she has hung a wreath of violets, while the green mound at her feet is almost hidden with the same fragrant blossoms.

The cross bears this inscription—

"SACRED TO THE MEMORY
OF
PHYLLIS,
YOUNGEST DAUGHTER OF THE LATE HENRY HOPE,
AND FOUNDRESS OF THIS CHURCH.
AGED 24 YEARS."

"Lord, I have loved the habitation of Thy House."

Within a few feet there stands another similar cross, evidently of more recent date.

"SACRED TO THE MEMORY
OF
CICELY,
WIFE OF THE REV. AUSTIN BLAKE,
VICAR OF WALTON SUDBURY.
AGED 32."

"God hath given unto us eternal life."

A little way apart, and half hidden beneath a bower of trailing ivy, stands a low simple granite monument, engraved with these words—

“IN MEMORY OF

R. A.,

WHOSE MORTAL REMAINS REST IN A FAR DISTANT LAND, AND WHO
GAVE HIS LIFE FREELY THAT OTHERS MIGHT BE SAVED.”

“We are more than conquerors, through Him that loved us.”

As her eye wanders from one to another of these memorials of the dead, the old lady gives a weary sigh, while half dreamily she murmurs aloud—

“‘They are all gone into a world of light,
And I alone stay lingering here.’

“Ah me! the years are long—I want to join them—to go to my children. When will the summons come?”

But at this moment the last glad notes of the Easter hymn are dying away, the school door is thrown open, and about thirty lads and lasses come trooping out, followed by a girl of some nineteen years, who quickly spying the lonely figure, runs lightly down the path and across a little wooden bridge leading from the playground into the churchyard.

"Dear Aunt Margaret! why did you not come in to hear our practice?"

"It sounded very sweet here, my dear, and the lovely evening charmed me into staying out. Besides"——

"Yes. I see your wreaths—how lovely! Primroses for dear mother, and violets as usual for Aunt Phyllis. Was she so fond of them?"

"Yes; it was always her delight to find the very earliest buds, and no one knew so well where they grew. On the day of her funeral, every man, woman, and child in the parish brought their violet wreath or cluster to lay on the coffin."

"And you have hung primroses and blue-bells mixed here," says the girl, glancing towards the nameless monument. "I often wish I could remember Cousin Raymond—our family hero. Some day will you tell me all about him, auntie? I know he and Aunt Phyllis were dear friends, but I never understood whether they were really engaged."

"Ask your father to tell you, darling; he will, if you say that I wished it. It is too long a story for my old voice to relate—ay, and in some ways too sad also—though the bright

light shone through the clouds, and I can see it more clearly as I approach the dark shore."

"You must not talk like that, dear. How could any of us spare you? Have you not been 'mother and grannie both and auntie all in one' to us children all these years? What would become of father without you?"

"You are his right hand now, Maggie, and a good dependable little mother to the little ones. I often feel as if my life-work were nearly done, and I were free to rejoice in the rest so near at hand. My sweet Phyllis and your dear mother seem to have been waiting for me so long!"

"Here comes father!" says the girl, as a grey-haired, but slight and active-looking clergyman comes up the path. "You will let him take you up to the Vicarage now, and stay for evensong, won't you? Do—I want you to see how lovely the decorations will look when finished."

"Not to-night, Maggie. I must go home and keep my Easter vigil quietly and alone, or I shall not be fit for to-morrow's feast. See, there is old George watching for me, and Snowball's white head looking over the gate. Thank you, Austin," as the clergyman draws her arm

within his, and turns towards the gate. "What a glorious sunset—making one think of the brightness of to-morrow's dawn. May all Easter blessings be yours, and your dear children's."

And with a loving embrace to the girl, and a warm pressure of the father's hand, Miss Hope steps into her old-fashioned pony phaeton, and is driven homewards by the white-haired groom in charge of it.

"Father," says Margaret Blake that night, when, the younger children being in bed, his sermon for to-morrow completed, and the labours of the day justly considered at an end, she draws her chair close to his for their evening "cose," "I want you to tell me something more about the old days when darling mother and Aunt Phyllis were young, and you first came to stay at Holmewood. And I want to know about Cousin Raymond, and why his monument is in our churchyard. I remember long ago, when I was quite a little child, asking mother, and she said I should know when I was older, and to-day Aunt Margaret told me to ask you."

The Vicar sighs, as he lays his hand on his daughter's dark hair, and looks half fondly, half sadly into the upturned, eager face: "You are

not much like your mother, my Maggie. Sometimes I think you seem older in some ways than she ever was. You can remember her well, can you not?"

"Oh yes, father! I was ten—nearly eleven—when she left us. I remember so well what a bright merry playfellow she used to be. Poor little Phyl and Earnest, I am so sorry for them to grow up without knowing her!"

"They have no recollection then? But ah! what am I thinking of! They were mere babies when she died—poor little ones!"

"What would have become of any of us without Aunt Margaret?"

"Yes; she has been as good a mother and guardian to you children, as she was long ago to her own little sisters."

"Grandmamma died very young, did she not?"

"Yes; she was your grandfather's second wife, as you know—not Margaret's mother: indeed there were only a few years' difference in age between them, and many people wondered that she, who had been practically mistress of his house for several years, should have borne the second marriage so well. But your grand-

mother was a very sweet, gentle creature, only too glad to have a stronger nature to lean on, and when she died, her chief earthly comfort lay in the knowledge that Margaret would be good to her two little delicate girls."

"And grandpapa did not survive her long?"

"No; he died the following year, and Margaret and the children were left alone. They had an old governess to superintend their education for some years, but she had to return to her invalid sister when your mother was seventeen, and Phyllis a year younger."

"And when did Aunt Phyllis first begin to think of building our church? What a different place Walton Sudbury must have been before that was done!"

"You may well say so. It was the wildest, most heathen-like hamlet in the whole county—no school, no church nearer than Sudbury, where the clergyman had more than enough to do in looking after his own population. Drunkenness, dishonesty, and every sort of vice thrived in Walton Sudbury; men spent their wages at the public-house, and starved their families without compunction; children grew up in absolute ignorance, and except through the charities of

Hopedale Manor, no one took any interest in the place, which had come to be looked on as a hotbed of iniquity."

"And Aunt Phyllis achieved this great change? Built and endowed the church, and vicarage, and school? It was a grand work!"

"It was; and for such frail delicate hands. She lived long enough to see it completed, and the new era hopefully begun, and then, like St. Paul, she was able joyfully to say, 'I have finished my course,' and to lie down without one regret, in the rest for which she longed."

"And yet," says Maggie, thinking of the bright young aunt of whom the elder villagers still speak with loving enthusiasm, "it seems hard to die at twenty-four—to be *content* to leave it all, I mean."

"Her great life-sorrow had fallen four years before that. She could not face life without *him*—though we, many of us, would have held her back if we could. But, my child, it is late, and we must not stay to talk longer now, or you will be tired for our early service on the blessed Easter morn. Some other time I will tell you more—perhaps read to you a few notes which I have kept of those old times, when I

first stayed with Raymond Anstruther and his father, and learned to know your mother and aunts."

The history, which in detached fragments the Vicar afterwards related to his daughter, is given somewhat more in detail in the following pages, commencing at a period some thirty years before the Easter Eve already described.

CHAPTER II.

A MORNING RIDE.

“HAVEN’T you finished that Italian translation yet, you dear, plodding old Cicely? Make haste; it is such a lovely morning, and I can feel quite a breath of spring in the air. The ponies are pining for exercise, and I am longing for a gallop over Sudbury Common.

The speaker, a fair-haired, slender maiden of sixteen, childish for her age, but giving promise of great beauty, turned from the window as she spoke, and laid her hand on the shoulder of a girl very like herself, but with softer, less brilliant colouring, and a graver expression in her blue eyes.

“I have all but finished, Phyl—be quiet one moment;” and Cicely’s pen travelled swiftly over the paper until another interruption was caused by the entrance of a lady, dark, stately, and very handsome, though forty years of a

somewhat chequered life had sown a few silver threads in her still abundant black braided hair.

“Sister, sister!”—the younger girl danced merrily up to the new-comer and clasped her round the waist—“use your influence with that obdurate Cicely, won’t you? Tell her that so fine a day in the first week in February is a precious rarity not to be wasted, and that instead of scribbling there, she ought to be galloping on King Oberon’s back over Sudbury Common.”

Margaret Hope smiled. “I almost think Phyllis is right—for once—my good, conscientious Cicely. Sunshine like this does not come often at this time of year. I think the sorrows of Silvio Pellico may wait for another time. Are the ponies ordered? I want Thomas to carry a parcel for me—that frock we finished last night for Widow Phillipps’ child.”

“Oh! need we take Thomas?” cried Phyllis. “I want to stop at one or two cottages in Walton Sudbury, and Cicely promised to look in on old John Dawse, but we can hold each other’s ponies, and it seems so stupid to have a groom dancing attendance.”

“I had rather you would to-day,” said Miss Hope; and “sister’s” fiat being law, the girls ran away to get ready.

Ten minutes later they were mounting their steeds at the door, Miss Hope looking on with a tender, almost motherly pride at the pretty scene.

Thirty years ago girls did not study such severe simplicity in their riding attire, and the velvet caps with long blue feathers were far more becoming than the stiff head-gear of modern date. Their hair, too, instead of being tightly plaited on the back of the head, hung in loose, natural curls—Cicely’s of pale flaxen, and her sister’s shining like molten gold in the sun.

Thomas felt a conscious pride in the knowledge that his young ladies were the best mounted and had the prettiest seats in the county; and it was with a grin of satisfaction that he remarked, while settling the folds of Phyllis’ skirt, “She’s wonderful fresh this morning, Miss, sure-*ly*: a gallop will take some of the nonsense out of her, I hope.”

“She’s as sensible as any Christian—the beauty!” was the indignant reply, as the little

hand smoothed the arching silver-grey neck ;
“but she knows it’s a lovely morning, and wants to make the most of her fun. Good-bye, sister dear ! Don’t wait luncheon, or be a bit anxious till you see us back !”

The girls had lately had a Shakespeare fever, and in their delight over the “Midsummer Night’s Dream” had re-named their numerous pets in its honour. Thus the ponies were Oberon and Titania (the latter a tricksy, winsome creature, not unlike her namesake) ; and the white wiry-haired terrier which lived in the stable, cared for no one in particular, and always accompanied the horses, was less appropriately named “Puck.”

About a mile through quiet by-lanes, heavy with the mud of a recently broken up frost, brought the riders to a hamlet, consisting of small thatched cottages, built in groups of twos and threes, and most of them presenting an appearance of poverty, and even squalor. The two public-houses, which appeared to drive a thriving trade, were the only exceptions to this rule.

Some ragged children hanging listlessly about curtsied their greetings to the riders, who drew

up at the door of one abode, if possible more miserable than the rest. They were about to dismount, when the owner came out—a care-worn, though still young and rather pretty woman.

“Good morning, Mrs. Dart,” said Phyllis, riding up close to the low doorway. “I am glad to see you looking better. This bright weather will cheer you at last, I hope.”

“Some troubles are past the weather’s mending, Miss Phyllis,” was the dispirited answer. “Though, to be sure, if it gets a bit drier I may be able to send the children to school, and that’ll be summut. They gets into mischief hanging about to home; but the poor things can’t walk a mile and a half into Sudbury and back every day in frost and snow, let the Rector say what he will.”

“I am sure Mr. Everett does not expect them to go in all weathers,” interposed Cicely gently. “But when it gets finer you will try to send them, Mrs. Dart. Mary would get on so well, Miss Everett tells me, if she could only attend regularly.”

“Ah! ’tis all very well for them as has carriages to ride in to talk of attending regular;

but my poor little ones, as has scarcely a shoe to their feet, the long walk's a sad punishment to them, sure enough. And 'tis as bad for us o' Sundays. I do call it a heathen sin to build houses for people to live in a mile and a half from church or school. One might as well be living among the savages for any Christian teaching we get—leastways, except from yourselves, young ladies."

"We will try to call oftener," said Phyllis, looking pained. "And I came to tell you there will be some broth to-morrow, if Mary or Peter could come to the Manor."

"Thank you kindly, Miss;" and with a parting salutation the sisters rode on, to bestow their parcel at a farther cottage, inhabited by a widow with a numerous flock. A few doors beyond this Phyllis again drew rein.

"Cicely, I must go in and speak to Ellen Furse; she has not been in church for two Sundays. I shall not be long." She sprang to the ground, throwing her bridle to Thomas, and crossed a neatly kept path leading to a cottage of rather better appearance. A young woman answered her knock, but, to Phyllis' surprise, did not, as usual, press her to "walk in."

"I was afraid, Ellen, that you were not well," began the girl gently. "I have not seen you——" She broke off in dismay, on discovering that her hostess' usually pretty face was swollen and discoloured, and one eye partially closed.

The poor thing put up her apron in a vain attempt to hide the disfigurement, and tried to murmur something about "a bad cold," but Phyllis caught her hand.

"No, no, Ellen; tell the truth. Some one has struck you. Ah!" as a look of intense sadness and humiliation crossed the other's face. "Not John! Impossible—he would never be such a brute, and he loves you so dearly."

The poor woman threw herself into a chair, and covering her face with her hands, sobbed aloud, rocking herself to and fro with irrepressible anguish.

The girl stood by in a tumult of sympathy, indignation, and bewilderment, not knowing what consolation to offer. Perhaps the soft touch of her hand on the woman's shoulder brought greater comfort and healing than any words, for when at last the violence of her sobs

began to abate, she murmured brokenly, "Bless you, Miss Phyllis—that's done me good. I haven't shed a tear till now; 'twas your sweet face overcame me. But to think of John, that was so good, and we not twelve months married!"

"How was it?" Phyllis asked, unable to repress a shudder of aversion at the thought of the aforesaid John.

"'Twas the cursed drink did it, Miss Phyllis. He always liked a drop, but he never used to take too much till we came here; and sometimes it seems as if there were nought else for a man to turn to."

"Nothing else, when he has his home and his wife!" cried Phyllis indignantly.

"Ay, Miss, but a man like John, as is cheerful and neighbourly like, needs something more. And I don't deny that I've been a bit dull and ailing of late, and not made his home as cheerful as I might; and the other chaps tempted him off to the Red Lion, and John's no more like himself when the drink is in him, than my old cat is like a wild tiger. Sunday's the worst day of all,—with the church so far away, and the public always standing handy.

I sometimes think if we'd a good parson living near and looking into things, it mightn't be so bad."

"But Mr. Everett comes sometimes?"

"Oh yes; he's kind enough, and speaks very pleasant when he's driving by, but he's getting an old man, and can't be expected to look after all those at the farthest end of his parish. 'Tis a dreadful out-of-the-way place here, you see."

"Well, I must go," said Phyllis sorrowfully; "my sister is waiting outside. Try to cheer up, Ellen, and don't lose heart. I am sure John is sorry now; isn't he? If it ever happens again, you must tell Miss Hope; she will be able to advise you better than I can."

A cloud of reflected sadness still hung over the bright young face, as Phyllis remounted her pony, and they had ridden for some yards in silence before she turned to her sister, startling Cicely with the sudden vehemence of her words.

"Cicey, if I live to grow up—if the money father left me ever becomes really mine—I will do something for Walton Sudbury! The people

shall not be left in this heathen, forsaken state a day longer than I can help."

"You mean," said Cicely, half bewildered, "that you would like to build a church here, so that they may not have to walk all the way to Sudbury?"

"Yes; a church and a school—it is cruel to send the children so far. But a church would be of no use without a clergyman. There must be a parsonage-house also."

"Phyllis dear, how nice that would be; but it would cost heaps and heaps of money."

"And I—we—shall have plenty when I come of age. Old nurse told me so long ago, and I asked sister. Father left her our guardian till we are twenty-one; and meantime the money is lying by and accumulating, all except what was spent on our education. We shall have more than sister ever had of her own, for there is our mother's fortune besides, and father left the same to each of us."

"But would sister approve of your spending yours so, do you think?" said timid Cicely.

Phyllis' blue eyes sparkled. "When I am of age I shall have no one's leave to ask. Five

years to wait! But sister is very good," she added, softening.

"And you'll let me help? I am not clever, like you, Phyl, but I love to hear your plans."

Phyllis bent over to pat her sister's pony, and the hand which held the reins.

"Of course you'll help me, darling. It will be your plan too. It isn't a new thought with me," she added gravely; "it comes into my mind whenever we ride through this dreary, desolate hamlet. I pray sometimes that it may come true, and that I may live to carry it out."

Cicely's face grew grave. "What makes you talk like that, dear Phyl? This bright sun makes one full of life and hope. I don't like to think about dying."

"Yes, life is very bright;" and the beautiful young face lighted up with eager enjoyment of the gifts of the present. "I like to feel it dancing all through me—just like Titania here, who is all on fire for a gallop. But yet, Cicely, our mother was very young when she died; and I have heard people say that we—I especially—am very like her."

Cicely drew nearer to her sister, and was

silent for a few moments. At last she said softly, "And it does not frighten you?"

"No; it did when I first began to think about it. But God will let us stay as long as He sees fit. And sister told me that our mother was quite, quite happy when she died. Her only trouble was about leaving us, and she grew quite content when sister promised to take care of us."

"Ah! I have always wondered. Do you think it was on our account that sister never married?"

"Partly, perhaps; but more because long and long ago, before father married our mother, when sister was very little older than you are now, she loved some one who—who was not good, and the parting almost broke her heart."

"Did nurse tell you this? Oh, who was it? Sir Henry Fortescue?"

"No; Colonel Anstruther."

"Raymond's father—the wicked Squire, as some of the people call him. Oh, Phyllis, not really!"

"Yes. It was long ago, when she was only just grown up. You know father always let

her take her own way in everything, even when she was a child. Colonel Anstruther was young too, and so handsome. Indeed he is that now, only so stern and dark and forbidding—like Byron's 'Lara,' I always think. Well, they were engaged for a short time, and nurse said a nobler-looking couple could not have been found. And then Margaret found out about his wild bad ways, and how he scoffed at all religion, and spent his Sundays in playing cards and billiards with friends who were worse than himself. And at first she tried to win him to better ways, but all in vain. And then—it was so like sister not to shrink from tearing out her own heart in a rightful cause—she told him that they must part, for she could not marry an unbeliever. And he swore that if she forsook him he would do worse still, and kept his word, alas! for Holmewood became a house that no good or right-minded people liked their sons to visit. And then, half out of a capricious fancy, half to punish Margaret for deserting him, Colonel Anstruther married a pretty, gentle girl, of half-foreign birth, who had been a governess in the house of one of his friends.

“She was very poor, and looked up to him with a blind, humble sort of adoration. But he soon wearied of his freak, and the poor girl found herself lonely, neglected, and almost without a friend in the world, for some of the neighbours were vulgar enough to look down upon her, and the nicer ones did not choose to visit Holmewood on its master’s account. And then sister behaved just as one would expect that she and no one else would do. She would not go to Colonel Anstruther’s house, but she invited the poor little bride to come to her, and became her staunch friend through life. And when Raymond was born, she did at last make up her mind to go to Holmewood, taking our mother with her. It was just after father’s second marriage, and sister was so much happier than she had been since her trouble, in having mother’s constant, sympathising friendship. And they both were very good to poor Mrs. Anstruther. I can’t remember her, but I daresay you can a little.”

“Oh yes! She was very pretty—something like Raymond on a very small scale. How fond he was of her!”

“I wonder whether he is come back from his

uncle's in Scotland? We have hardly seen him these holidays."

"Hark! Do you hear some one whistling 'Bonnie Dundee'? It really is quite uncanny, but I verily believe it *is* Raymond, unless our words have called up a vision."

CHAPTER III.

RAYMOND.

A YOUNG man—so young that he might more properly have been called a hobbledehoy, only there was never anything of boyish awkwardness about Raymond Anstruther—came trotting briskly between the high banks of a true West-Country lane, emerging into the highroad so suddenly as to create a commotion among the startled ponies. His stately black steed stood like a rock after the first start and snort of surprise, while the rider flourished his cap with a shout of delight.

“Hurrah! I was coming over to see you, but this is jollier. Where are you bound for?”

“For the common first,” said Cicely; “but you will come back to luncheon and see sister, won’t you?”

“I wish I could; but father wants me back to drive with him to Templeton this afternoon.

I only turned up the night before last, you know, just in time to keep my birthday. What do you think of my father's present?"

"That lovely horse? Oh, Raymond, how glad I am; it is just what you wanted."

"Yes; father had his eye on him before he was broken, and bought him straight from the breeder's hands. He'll carry me rarely to hounds next winter, and I may get a day or two now, as the frost has broken up."

"And you are really eighteen! Are you going back to Eton at all?"

"No; going to cram with an army tutor after Easter, and have a try for the cavalry. I only wish I were a year older. Charlie Coventry, who was in the same house with me, has got his commission, and is having all the fun in the Crimea now!"

"Fun! Oh, Raymond, I am glad you are not there; and the war will be over before you are able to join, won't it?"

"I don't know, Phyllis. Selfishly speaking, I hope not. Lord Raglan would be a glorious chief to serve under."

"And you will be at home till Easter?"

"Yes; so it seems. I don't anticipate a

very lively time, for we have got to ask that cousin of mine, Austin Blake, down to stay, and what to do with him I'm sure I can't tell."

"But you knew each other at Eton, did you not?"

"Well, a little; but he was at college, and I an oppidan, so we did not come much in one another's way. He wasn't a bad sort of fellow, I believe, but rather of the meek, pious kind—just what won't suit my father, and will be likely to provoke some of his bitterest double-edged sayings."

"Poor boy!" murmured Phyllis, in genuine compassion. "I forget how he is your cousin?"

"His mother was father's eldest sister—a good soul enough, but too much given to preaching, and the Colonel won't stand that."

"I've heard sister talk of her," said Cicely; and both the girls remembered the subject of the recent conversation.

"There's a carriage coming behind us," observed Raymond, drawing his horse on one side, and a moment later a large barouche drove by.

The elderly couple occupying it smiled and kissed their hands to the girls, but took no notice of their companion, who half mechanically raised and quickly replaced his cap. A bitter expression crossed his handsome face, as falling into line again, he turned to Phyllis, who was next him.

“You may expect a lecture on the dangers of bad company, next time you are favoured with a visit from the Archdeacon and his spouse. I feel quite petrified from the effects of that stony glare.”

“I don’t think they knew it was you,” said gentle Cicely; but Phyllis, who was quicker sighted, threw up her head indignantly.

“It is a shame, and I hate such Pharisaical nonsense. I am sure sister would say the same.”

“Bravo, little champion!” and Raymond bent down to give a caress to the pony, which might have been intended for the rider. “There’s nothing like a true, genuine feminine way of standing up for the oppressed. Well, I suppose we *are* a bad lot, and a shock to clerical notions of propriety. It is many a long day since my father ‘sat under’ that venerable gentleman,

and his lengthy discourses are not much in my line either."

"But you go to church? Oh, Raymond"—

"Well, not very often, I'm afraid. People don't like to be preached at, except now and then by sweet little counsellors on grey ponies. And now for a gallop! How bleak the common looks! Last time I was here was in the autumn, and the furze was all one blaze."

"And before that the heather," said Cicely.

"Yes, it looks bare and brown now, but spring will be coming soon."

"Ware rabbit holes! I don't want to break Douglas' legs the first time I ride him. Here's a safe open bit—good-bye, ladies;" and the powerful black stretched himself for a racing gallop across the wild open ground, soon distancing his smaller companions.

"How well he rides," said Phyllis, at last drawing rein, and panting with the quick exercise through the high keen air. The old groom rode up alongside with a prudent caution.

"Best go quietly a bit, young ladies. Titania's a bit blown; she's not in such condition as Mr. Anstruther's hunter."

"Which means," whispered Cicely, "that

prudent Thomas is afraid Miss Phyllis will be overtired, and he will get the blame."

But Raymond had now turned his horse, and came flying back to them.

"Beg pardon; was that too much for you? I wanted to give him one fair trial; he's a clipper and no mistake. I suppose we must be turning homewards."

"When does this cousin of yours arrive?" Phyllis asked.

"Next Saturday. It really is a bore. I can get on well enough with the Colonel by myself, but if Austin turns out a muff (as I am very much afraid he may) the two in one house will be more than anybody can stand."

"Bring him to see us."

"All right; I will. Who is that urchin who is touching his cap so obtrusively?"

"Oh, that is Johnnie Turner, one of sister's scholars. She has them regularly twice a week."

"And do you two help to teach the young idea? I wish I could look in 'unbeknownst.'"

"I am not much use in teaching," said Cicely ruefully; "the children never do what I tell them."

"You are too good-natured," said Phyllis, when they had done laughing at this confession. "Now, I can scold better than sister, when I try."

"Well, but about these same pupils," observed Raymond; "why don't they go to school at Sudbury?"

"It is such a long way for the poor little things in winter—two miles and more. I wish—oh dear! there is no use in thinking about it yet."

"Thinking about what? Come, Phyllis, what is this mighty unattainable wish?"

"A church and school to be built some day in Walton Sudbury," Cicely explained. "You see it is such an out-of-the-way place, and the people seem to have no advantages."

"A very pretty vision! And who is to build it."

"I will—please God," said Phyllis, in a low reverent voice, so full of earnestness that Raymond's laugh was checked, and he turned with unfeigned surprise to look at the fair childish creature, who spoke as though recording a solemn vow.

“You—little Phyl! Why, how old are you now?”

“Sixteen. I must wait five years, I know; but we may begin to plan it all before then.”

“And what does Miss Hope say to this grand plan?”

“I am not sure that she quite believes in it yet. But she will help, I know, when the time comes. Oh, Willie!” as another boy passed them, “how untidy you are again. What has become of the new jacket?”

The boy hung his head and looked sheepish, till urged again to answer. At last the words came reluctantly—“Please, Miss, I ain’t got ’un now.”

“What! have you given it away?”

Another pause. “Come, out with it,” cried Raymond, rather amused. “I daresay Miss Phyllis will let you off this time. Where’s the new jacket gone?”

“Please, sir, father pawned ’un. He hadn’t got no money, nor mother hadn’t none to give ’un, and he wanted to go to the Red Lion, and he took and pawned my jacket and Lizzie’s red cloak, and ”——

“There ! don’t ask any more,” said Phyllis, bending over her pony’s neck to hide the tears in her eyes. “That is a specimen of what our village is. Drink !—some of the men would sell their souls to get that horrible drink, and their wives and children may starve or not, for all they care. And what can you expect ? The place is utterly heathenish ; they have no one to teach them better—no example to look to. Sister does her best ; but she is a woman, and has no real authority. Oh ! if we had but a good clergyman on the spot—one whom they could look up to and respect, and who would know how to win their confidence and get a hold upon them ! They are not bad-hearted really—only thoughtless—and this drink makes demons of them at times. We are always hearing of one or another being summoned before the magistrates for poaching, or fighting, or being riotous ; and then if they are fined, it is the poor wives again who suffer. Look there !” as they rode through the hamlet, and a couple of able-bodied, loutish-looking men came reeling by, almost under their horses’ feet ; “isn’t that a sight to make one’s heart ache ?”

“It is one not fit for your eyes,” said Raymond angrily. “Drunken boors! I hope you never ride or walk here alone?”

“We are not afraid,” Cicely replied. “The people all know us, and are very civil and kind. We come and read to the old people sometimes; there is no one else to do it.”

“I wish I were your brother,” said Raymond, almost fiercely. “Girls are never half taken care of who have not got one.”

“I wish you were,” Cicely said eagerly. “You could do so much that we cannot—women are so helpless where wrong has to be made right.”

“But I shouldn’t like a brother who tried to keep me from visiting the cottages,” cried Phyllis. “One thing is, he would not succeed.”

Raymond laughed.

“No; I suspect you’ve a pretty strong will of your own, Miss Phyl—something like your pony there—very pretty and gentle to look at, till you get the bit between your teeth. Well, here are the cross-roads, and we must part company, and Douglas must get me home in time for the Colonel’s lunch. Good-bye! I’ll bring Austin over the first spare day, and you must tell me

what you think of him. Give Miss Hope my love!"

The last words were shouted, as the boy rode off at a hand-gallop, his companions pursuing their way more leisurely homewards.

CHAPTER IV.

THE COUSINS.

A RAILWAY station is not a very cheerful place on a cold dark February evening, and there is always a blank feeling of disappointment, on first arriving in strange quarters, to find no one there to meet you, and nothing to do but wait as patiently as circumstances allow. So thought a slight dark-haired lad of nineteen, as, on leaving his second-class carriage at the large station of Templeton, he looked up and down the platform, searching in vain for a friendly face.

“Any one here from Holmewood?” said a porter, doubtfully repeating the traveller’s question. “No, sir, not that I know of; but I’ll inquire.”

He went off to interrogate the stationmaster, returning to say that no one from Holmewood had been in to-day.

The young man sighed, shivered, took a turn up and down the platform, glanced regretfully at the closed bookstall, and finally sat down near it, with a look of resignation, declining the porter's suggestion that the waiting-room would be warmer.

Presently the noise of wheels and of a fast-trotting horse were heard approaching the station, and the porter turned round with a congratulatory smile.

"That's the Holmewood dogcart, sir, and Mr. Raymond driving, unless I'm mistaken—he generally goes that pace."

He picked up the modest portmanteau as he spoke, and the traveller following, soon found himself at the lighted entrance, and shaking hands with a young fellow about his own age, who bent down for the purpose from the seat of a high dogcart.

"Here you are, Austin! That's right. I hope I haven't kept you waiting; but the train is not often punctual, and I had some things to do for my father in the town. Jump in and pull the rug round you—Guinevere won't stand. Soho! old girl—steady. Is that all your luggage? All right then! Let her go, Jim!"

and the spirited mare flew off at a pace which made it difficult for the small active groom to spring into his perch behind.

The rapid movement through the cold air almost took away the traveller's breath for the first few moments, but growing more used to it, and to the twilight of a February evening, he turned to take a closer survey of his companion. They had last met as schoolboys, and with very little in common, though the shy, studious lad had always heartily admired his far more brilliant and popular cousin. Still he dreaded this visit, having been accustomed to hear his uncle spoken of in terms of fear, and almost dislike, by all who knew him; and Raymond, though good-natured and open-handed at Eton, was not unlikely to have grown overbearing and spoiled. Yet when he spoke, Austin was conscious of again falling under the spell he had formerly acknowledged—there was something indescribably winning in the frank clear tones.

“I hope you won't find it very slow at Holme-wood. There is never much going on, but I manage to be pretty jolly there. Have you brought a gun?”

“No,” said Austin, hesitating; but the next

moment reproaching himself for moral cowardice, "fact is, I don't possess one."

"Oh! my father can supply you; of course it was stupid of me to forget you live in a town. How did you leave my aunt?"

"Pretty well, thanks. How many miles have we to drive?"

"Close on six—Guinevere will do it in forty minutes. Do you care to drive?"

"I could not hold that mare," said Austin, with a frank laugh, as he compared his own slight wrist with his cousin's muscles, "and we should probably both end our evening in the ditch."

"Well, that would be a pity, especially as I'm uncommonly hungry. I hope the Colonel won't have waited—it is his fault for giving me such a bothering lot of commissions to do. Now, between ourselves, the less we talk for the next mile or two the better, for there's a deep ditch each side of the lane—we turn off here—and it takes all I know to keep the mare in the middle of the road."

Accepting the hint, Austin subsided into his own thoughts, and, influenced either by them or the intense cold, was conscious of little more,

until he found himself turning in through a large entrance-gate.

"Is this Holmewood?" he asked, trying in vain to distinguish the outlines of the stately limes and Spanish chestnuts, between an avenue of which they were driving.

"Yes," said Raymond, "we are just there. Quick with the white gate, Jim, or she'll be over it; she's been pulling like a fiend this last ten minutes. Now, here's the house," as they drew up in front of a massive pile of dark red sandstone, often described to Austin by his mother as one of the "stately homes of Old England."

Yet there was nothing cheery or homelike in its appearance on this dark winter's evening; and the door, though quickly opened by two men-servants, revealed no welcoming blaze of light from the great hall. A fire smouldered gloomily on the hearth, and a couple of bedroom candles were hastily produced by the butler, with an intimation that it only wanted five minutes to the half-hour.

"Colonel gone to dress?" inquired Raymond; and receiving an affirmative answer, he turned quickly to his companion—"I am afraid we

must hurry ; my father never likes to keep dinner waiting. I will show you your room."

He bounded up the great oak staircase, three steps at a time, his cousin following more carefully, and threw open the door of a large oak-panelled room, gloomy and grand, as all the rest of his surroundings appeared to the shy lad, accustomed to the small gas-lit rooms of a house in a country town.

His hands were very cold, and he fumbled helplessly with the lock of his portmanteau, until the footman, coming to his assistance, put the finishing stroke to his nervousness by the announcement that dinner was on the table and the Colonel waiting.

However, Raymond presently dashed in fully dressed, settled his cousin's refractory tie, and slipping his arm through his own, ran down to the library, where, standing on the hearthrug, Austin beheld the uncle who had so often been the terror of his dreams.

A man between fifty and sixty, unusually tall, with dark grizzled hair and moustache, his usual expression grave, but relaxing sometimes into a smile, which had little of mirth and much of sneering bitterness in its cold, slight curve of the

lip. Still, the profile was almost faultless; the dark eyes, like those of his son, could flash with wonderful brightness; and Austin Blake acknowledged the truth of his mother's assertion, that her brother in younger days had been one of the handsomest men in the Guards.

His greeting to his young nephew was courteous, but hardly such as to set a shy boy at his ease; and the next minute the three found themselves seated at dinner in the great dining-room, at a table where thirty guests could have dined.

The talk was spasmodic, and chiefly carried on by Raymond, who rattled on about the cold, the people he had seen in Templeton, and the manner in which Guinevere had pulled, all the way home.

The Colonel meanwhile was observing his nephew—scarcely seen by him until now, since a family quarrel had parted him from his only sister twenty years ago.

“I suppose,” he said meditatively, “your mother is growing an oldish woman by now? or do sermon-reading and church-going conduce to perpetual youth?”

Austin coloured and looked uncomfortable, and Raymond struck in to his help.

"Now, father, that's not fair; how can you expect Austin, who has been used to Aunt Mary all his life, to notice the gradual change that must have come? Besides, he is too dutiful a son to call his mother an old woman."

"You have my free leave to call me an old man as often as you choose, my boy," said the Colonel, while his eye rested with a kind of grim satisfaction on his son's handsome face. "It wouldn't be far from the truth," he added, with a weary sigh.

"Old—when you are not fifty-eight! My dear dad, what has come to you this evening? You shall just come out hunting to-morrow—(oh bother! I forgot Sunday)—well, next week any way, and prove your youthful vigour to your own satisfaction."

"Where's the meet on Monday? Bidgood? No, I shall not go. Conrad had two long days last week, and the young horse is not fit for that stiff country; but you can take Austin if he likes. The bay cob can jump well enough with a light-weight on his back. I suppose you can ride?" he added, turning quickly and half contemptuously to his nephew.

"I am very fond of it; but I've never hunted

in my life, nor ridden anything but a pony when we were at Brighton two years ago."

The Colonel shrugged his shoulders. "Well, you'll have to get Raymond to teach you. He rode by instinct when he was four years old."

"Because I had a good old dad to keep me in ponies," said Raymond, with his pleasant smile. "You should have seen them, Austin, graduating in size from the Shetland rat to the smart fourteen-hander. And now my father's last birthday present has reached the very acme of my fondest hopes—you shall see it to-morrow."

"Fill your cousin's glass," said the Colonel, looking more benevolent. "What! a teetotaller? Bless me, what are the pious young men of our day coming to? Well, if you don't want any more, Raymond, we may as well go to the billiard-room."

CHAPTER V.

SUNDAY AT HOLMEWOOD.

ON the morning after his arrival at Holmewood, Austin Blake awoke to the recollection that it was Sunday—perhaps the most trying of all days to spend in a strange house, and amid unfamiliar and uncongenial surroundings.

From force of habit he rose early, and coming into the breakfast-room at nine o'clock, was surprised to find no one down. Half an hour—nearly an hour passed—Colonel Anstruther came in, closely attended by the large mastiff which seldom left his side; and ten minutes later Raymond's light footstep was heard running down-stairs.

“Sabbath laziness as usual!” observed the Colonel, with his cynical smile. “Raymond, you will horrify your cousin here with our heathenism.”

“What time does morning service begin?”

said Austin timidly. "I have fancied once or twice I heard a distant bell."

"Very probably: the summons commences by a dismal tolling at ten, and his reverence is in the reading-desk exactly at half-past—an abominable hour for those who have a long distance to walk—not that it makes much difference to us."

"I think I'll be a good boy and put in an appearance with Austin this afternoon," observed Raymond. "My dear fellow, we could not be in time this morning if we ran all the way, which I have no intention of doing, nor of swallowing my coffee scalding hot, to oblige the Archdeacon or any one else."

Austin felt very uncomfortable. His mother, a good woman, but one of the severest and most uncompromising type, had bade him never shrink from uplifting his testimony in the good cause, but instinct warned him that it would scarcely be becoming to do so in the present instance. He was a guest, and a very youthful one, in his uncle's house, and though the effort of going breakfastless to church would not be great, he could hardly do so without appearing to reflect upon his uncle and cousin.

So, reproaching himself all the while for cowardice, he let the opportunity slip, and after the dilatory meal was over, Raymond took him to see the horses and dogs, and down to the lake, where, during the late frost, excellent skating had been attainable. Then Austin asked if he might go and write to his mother, again reproaching himself for lacking courage to say he wished to read the morning service.

He spent the morning in his own room, somewhat disturbed by the voices of Raymond and his father, as they strolled up and down the south terrace with an army of dogs at their heels, the Colonel as usual smoking a huge cigar. By-and-by Raymond's clear ringing shout summoned him to luncheon, and directly afterwards the two youths set off through the park to church.

"It is a dreary sort of function," grumbled Raymond, "and really I am going only out of civility to you, old fellow. I hope you are much obliged."

"But," said his cousin, hesitating, "do you really mean—that you—that Uncle Gerard—treat Sunday just like any other day?"

“Well, the fact is, my father quarrelled with the Archdeacon some years ago, and swore he would never sit through another sermon of his. I go now and then, when the spirit moves me—not very often, I’m afraid. After all, one can say one’s prayers at home.”

“But,” said Austin, with a desperate effort, “is it not neglecting a command?”

“Oh! you mean about the Sabbath. Well, if you come to that, I do keep it in a sort of way; I am sure I never do any work, or my father either. He smokes a few extra cigars, and grumbles because he can’t get the newspaper, and I generally devote more time to the study of natural history—*i.e.*, the horses and dogs. But you needn’t pitch into me to-day, at any rate, when I am behaving in such an orthodox manner, and piloting you to church. Here we are!” and vaulting over a low stile, Raymond led the way down a path across a couple of fields, leading to a small ill-kept churchyard.

There were sheep amongst the graves, at which Austin looked with ill-concealed horror, and many of the tombstones looked neglected and falling into decay.

The bell ceased as they entered the church, which was cold and only partially full, several of the villagers looking round with surprise as the tall figure of "the young Squire" walked up the aisle.

Austin presently found himself in a large square pew, furnished with dingy red cushions, among which his cousin soon subsided, in as luxurious an attitude as the upright walls would permit. He stood up during the Psalms, but made little attempt to join in the responses, nor, to Austin's dismay, did he once take the trouble to kneel.

Try as he would to fix his own attention, Austin found his mind more occupied by the easy lounging figure, the handsome half-mocking face beside him, than the holier subjects on which he strove to dwell, especially when, during the sermon, Raymond folded his arms and fixed his eyes on the preacher with a satirical expression that made him for the time being singularly like his father.

"I wonder who that lad was in the Anstruthers' pew?" the Archdeacon afterwards remarked to his wife. "It was quite a comfort to see any one there who knew how to behave

in church. Raymond grows worse every time he comes home, and I am afraid the example is bad for the village boys."

"He does not often come, which perhaps is a good thing for others, though not for himself," observed Mrs. Trueman. "I suspect to-day it was only out of compliment to his companion, who must be one of the Blakes, I fancy. Don't you remember Mary Anstruther, the Colonel's sister?"

"Who married Laurence Blake? To be sure I do. He was a very good fellow, though rather a weak one. This boy is very like him."

"I don't think he has a weak face. There is a look of his mother about him, and she was a regular Anstruther. I wonder she sends him here; I can't fancy a more dangerous companion than Raymond."

"Perhaps; and yet I confess to a certain secret liking for the boy, with his handsome face and reckless ways. Of course, one cannot notice him after his father's glaring conduct—even apart from the rudeness to myself—but I feel sorry for it sometimes. His mother was a very sweet creature."

"She paid a bitter penalty for her folly, poor

thing! What an escape that was for Margaret Hope!"

"He never would have become what he is now had he married Margaret Hope. She is one of the few women who would have had the courage to stand up against him in the right cause."

"Well, she was much wiser not to risk it. What I don't understand is her extraordinary folly in allowing Raymond, who is nearly as wicked and reckless as his father, to be on intimate terms with those sweet young sisters of hers."

"They have known each other all their lives, which makes a difference. Perhaps they may do him more good than he can do them harm."

"It is not prudent—so very pretty and winning as they are, Phyllis especially. By-the-by, she is quite old enough to be confirmed now. Why does not Margaret see about it? Last year the excuse about Cicely was that she wished to wait for her sister."

"Oh! I forgot to tell you. The Bishop will hold a confirmation at Sudbury in the spring—the exact date is not fixed yet. I must see about getting my classes together."

“But you go into residence in March.”

“Yes, but if we are fortunate enough to get Rivers here, he will carry on the work with energy enough and to spare. I wish there were any hope of Raymond Anstruther as a candidate.”

“Most unlikely! He is probably ridiculing your sermon at this moment for his father’s amusement.”

Mrs. Trueman’s surmise was not far from the truth. As the three gentlemen sat over the walnuts that evening, Raymond excited his father’s grim mirth by his mimicry of the Archdeacon’s rather pompous delivery, and satirically attempted to demolish the religious argument he had used. But to the surprise of both father and son, the silent, nervous lad, whom they had begun to regard as a nonentity, suddenly roused up into an eager and not ill-expressed defence of the sermon.

“I didn’t like his way of putting it,” he finally owned, blushing crimson with his own temerity; “it sounded so harsh, but it was true nevertheless.”

“True that we shall be eternally condemned if we do or don’t do certain prescribed works,

and go through certain ceremonies? What then becomes of the doctrine of faith, Master Deputy-parson?"

The Colonel's sneer was very hard to face, but Austin's spirit was roused now, and he answered unflinchingly—

"Faith can't be made an excuse for doing evil works without fear of punishment. If we know what is right, and neglect it, we shall be judged accordingly, though our Saviour"—the boy dropped his voice reverently—"died that those who sin and really repent may be saved."

"But," said Raymond, who was fairly taken aback by the timid boy's outburst, "if His power is all-sufficient to forgive sins, what does it matter what we do? It seems to me you are inventing a limit for it."

"He will *not* pardon wilful sin," said Austin, in a very low voice. "He says so Himself, don't you remember? about the servant who knew his master's will and did it not."

Colonel Anstruther rose with an impatient shrug.

"Well, if I've not been to church to-day, I have at least been favoured with an improving

discourse at home. Now, is your reverence too strait-laced for a game at billiards?"

"Will you excuse me, uncle?" said Austin, trembling visibly, but raising his eyes bravely to that dark, forbidding face. "If I may, I will go to the library and find a book to-night."

"Sabbath observances, eh?" said the Colonel bitterly, while Raymond, who really liked his cousin, gave his shoulder a warning touch. "Well, go along; I hope you will succeed in finding some pious volume, but I greatly fear we do not excel in that kind of literature. Raymond, if you are not anxious to follow so excellent an example, I will give you your revenge for last night's defeat."

CHAPTER VI.

THE EFFECT OF EXAMPLE.

DURING the course of the following week Raymond took his cousin over to call at Hopedale, the place in which he himself, unconsciously, always appeared to the best advantage.

He was apparently on brotherly terms with the two girls, chivalrous and almost reverent in his manner to Miss Hope, whom he had learned to regard as his poor young mother's only friend.

Margaret was one of the very few who ventured to speak a home-truth to her boyish devotee, and she now took him to task on the score of his cousin's depressed and constrained appearance.

Raymond shrugged his shoulders.

"I know," he said, "it is bad enough, and no doubt I am to blame, but what to do with the fellow I don't know."

“Is he so disagreeable?”

“No; that’s the worst of it. He is not a bad sort by any means, but he is regularly out of his element among us, and can’t help showing it.”

“But supposing that element happened to be a purer, more exalted one than yours, can’t you make allowances for the difficulty of breathing in less healthy air?”

“Oh yes; we are debased enough, I daresay, but I don’t know that I like him the better for showing so plainly that he thinks so. Yet he has pluck undoubtedly; it required no small share of it to stand up against my father on Sunday about the church and the billiards.”

“Ah! those Sundays! You would think differently about them, Raymond, if you knew the fearful harm the example of indifference to religion may do to others. I know it is little use to preach to you about yourself.”

“Am I such an irreclaimable heathen? Nay, I should not be, perhaps, if I had any sermons less long-winded to listen to than our estimable Archdeacon’s.”

“Then hear mine now. Do you remember a young fellow from this parish who was one of

the under-grooms or helpers in your father's stable two years ago?"

"George Phillips? Yes, I remember him well—a pleasant, obliging lad, who was always ready to do more than his share of work. He left us to 'better himself,' I think, and became groom to some gentleman in London."

"Just so; and then in London he fell into wild, bad courses, took to drink, lost one place after another, and finally broke down in health, and came home a few months ago to die in his mother's cottage. I used to visit the poor lad when he was ill, and try to prepare him for the great change, which I saw from the first could not be far off. He had been one of my most promising Sunday-scholars, a boy in whom I had always taken an interest, and of whose prospects I had good hope when he first started in life. But on his return I found him sunk into a sort of miserable apathetic despondency, unable to realise, even to believe in the comfort of religion.

"His mother wept over it in vain. I went day after day, and Mr. Everett also used to read and pray by him—all without producing any effect. At last one day, not long before his death, the curtain of reserve lifted a little,

and he told me how the mischief had begun, when he first—a young impressionable lad—left home and entered service at Holmewood. ‘No one ever went to church or read their Bible there,’ he said, ‘and I was ashamed to be different from the rest. Master didn’t forbid his servants going, but he never set foot in the church himself—no more did Master Raymond. I tried going once, but the others laughed at me, and by degrees I got quite used to doing without. Then the Colonel took me out to carry his gun once or twice, or in the dogcart, and I heard him say things about God and religion that made me somehow look at all I’d been taught in a different light—as if it was just a lot of humbug, fit for old women, not for men living in the world.’

“I won’t weary you with all the details of the poor lad’s confession,” said Margaret, interrupting herself; “he died not many days after. We hoped there was a little gleam of better things—a dawning of penitence towards the last; but it is hard to say. When I saw him lying in his coffin, and thought how hopefully he had gone forth into the world, in his bright innocent youth, only a few years before,

my heart felt very sad. Think, Raymond, how different it might have been could he have had before him one example of what a Christian man's life should be."

There was a pause—then Raymond got up and walked to the window, and stood for some time looking out.

The two girls were on the terrace outside, and Austin with them, all three engaged in counting the first crocuses, now just opening their gold and purple throats to hail a rare gleam of February sun.

Austin was looking happier—more at his ease than his cousin had seen him. The anxious expression always worn in his uncle's presence had disappeared, and he looked cheerful and almost boyish.

On Raymond's handsome features, on the contrary, there rested a cloud that for the moment gave him a strong resemblance to his father. It was some moments before he spoke, and when he did his voice was husky.

"I never thought of anything like this. My father does not interfere with the servants, and rarely takes a horse out on Sunday. They could go to church if they liked."

“Yes; but they are not likely to go to a place they are accustomed to hear spoken of in terms of contempt by those whose judgment they are naturally prone to respect. Dear Raymond, I know it is hard for you, but you might do something to combat this evil.”

Raymond took a turn up and down the room, then stopped suddenly, with a brightening look on his face.

“Look here, Miss Hope! My father is going to town on Friday on some business matter, and is not likely to return before Monday. Will you let us—Austin and me—spend next Sunday with you? We will walk over early to Sudbury, and meet you at church there.”

Margaret could not repress a smile at the effect of her lecture.

“Very well, if you can put up with our Sunday ways—early dinner at one, and then you must amuse yourselves while the girls and I have our Sunday-classes—it is too far for us to go to church twice.”

“All right,” said Raymond heartily, and the next moment he had vaulted out of the window to join the other young folks on the terrace, whence merry voices and laughter soon reached

his friend's ears, as she sat trying to transact business with her bailiff in the library. For Margaret Hope, in addition to other talents, had a turn for farming, and her herd of Guernsey cattle, and the dairy furnished by them, were at once the admiration and envy of the neighbourhood.

Generous almost to a fault, she was prompt to detect any attempt at imposition, and had so clear a head, that her bailiff (an old servant of Mr. Hope's) was wont to declare that "his missis was as good as a master any day, and it was a pleasure to do business with her."

On the present occasion he was much perturbed over the shortcomings of one of his men, lately installed by Miss Hope as second waggoner—a young fellow who had at first appeared very promising.

"It's the old story," grumbled Walters, when Margaret expressed her surprise and regret; "that cursed drink is the ruin of them all. I did think John Furse might have kept straight, and there's no excuse for a man as has a comfortable home of his own to go back to of an evening."

"He married that nice housemaid of ours,

Ellen Hayes, that my sisters were so fond of. I am sorry for her, poor girl. But we can't keep a drunkard in charge of the horses, nor can I allow them to be ill-used. Suppose you talk to him, Walters, and say we will give him one more chance for his wife's sake; and if you have cause to complain again, he must go."

"I will, ma'am; but it will be of little use, I fear. He has grown surly and stubborn of late, and isn't likely to take my speaking in good part."

CHAPTER VII.

SUNDAY AT HOPEDALE.

THE morning of the following Sunday was cold and foggy, but Austin Blake was up betimes, eagerly looking forward to a day spent in the company of the ladies who had welcomed him so kindly.

He brought upon himself some good-natured raillery from his cousin, who declared he was not allowed time to eat his breakfast, and the two lads set out on their four-miles walk in high spirits, Raymond lamenting that the poor dogs were unable to share it. With all the haste they made, the Sudbury bells had ceased before they climbed the last hill, and the deep tones of the organ were commencing the "Venite" as Raymond noiselessly opened the small side-door.

Miss Hope's pew was near the top of the centre aisle, and Austin, as he followed his

cousin, felt painfully conscious that they were creating a disturbance, and that many curious glances were following their movements. Phyllis' blue eyes were lifted for a moment with a grave look of greeting, and Cicely handed a prayer-book to Raymond, to whom it had not occurred to bring one.

The service was simple, but very reverent and well-conducted ; and the Rector, a kind-looking, elderly man, preached a sermon not too much over the heads of his less-educated listeners.

Austin felt happier—less homesick and alone than he had done since his arrival at Holme-wood ; and as they left the church, Miss Hope's kindly smile and shake of the hand served to put him quite at his ease.

She thought him looking tired and pale, and offered a seat in her pony-carriage for the two-miles' drive to the manor, the two girls declaring that their feet were cold, and they would much prefer the walk.

The need of chaperonage never occurred to Margaret's mind. Her young sisters were in her eyes still children, and Raymond, in spite of his six feet of height, nothing more than the boy whom she had known all his life. The

walk homeward lay across fields, and as he helped her over the second stile, Phyllis, usually the spokeswoman when any difficulty had to be faced, began to lecture her guest upon his behaviour in church.

"Why *don't* you kneel in the prayers, Raymond? Every one does, except poor old James Dart, and he has some excuse, from his rheumatism."

"Very few men do," he answered, colouring a little, however, as he made this feeble excuse. "And after all, it is only a matter of form! We are told to pray in our hearts, and one can do that just as well in one position as another."

"But we are told to 'humble ourselves before the face of Almighty God,' and it isn't doing that to sit with one's arms folded," remonstrated Phyllis. "Besides, why do you take your hat off when you come into church?"

"Because other people do—out of respect to the place, I suppose."

"It seems to me that it would be no more wanting in respect to keep your hat on than to pray—to speak to Almighty God—in a careless irreverent attitude; only you would mind doing

the one because men—human beings—would notice it, and the other is only a secret affront offered to God Himself.”

The girl spoke eagerly, her soft cheek flushed with excitement. She had almost forgotten that it was Raymond Anstruther, and not one of her village scholars, whom she was lecturing, and Cicely looked half frightened at her boldness, especially when their companion made no reply for some moments.

At last he said—“I never thought about it in that light. To be sure, Austin always kneels, but I thought that was part of his bringing up, and he is half a parson already.”

“You’re not angry, are you?” said Phyllis gently. “Perhaps I ought not to have said it—things come out sometimes before I have time to think, and Cicely often tells me I hurt people’s feelings.”

“I don’t believe you could hurt the feelings of a midge if you tried,” said Raymond, glancing down at the sweet, appealing face. “You and Cicely are two little angels, if there are any such in the world.”

“Oh, hush! we are not really good; but we ought to be in such a safe, happy home as ours—

and now more than ever," she added thoughtfully, "because of the confirmation."

"When is that to be?"

"In April—just after Easter. There has not been a confirmation at Sudbury for three years, and Mr. Everett has so many candidates."

"I suppose," said Cicely, "you were confirmed at Eton? You must have been old enough, your last half."

Raymond hesitated a moment before replying, and stooped down to look for an imaginary blossom in the hedge. When he raised his face, it was flushed and somewhat disturbed.

"Well, no. I might have been, I suppose, but it was a bother attending the classes, and you know my father does not care much about such things. Austin was, and a lot of fellows I knew; but others again, and among them some of my principal chums, made light of the whole thing, and said fellows only did it to please their governors. And I'm afraid I thought very little about it."

"But it's not too late—you might be confirmed now!" cried Phyllis eagerly. "Dear Raymond, do! Colonel Anstruther would not mind if you told him you wished it."

Raymond winced. "I don't suppose he would forbid me, if you mean that; but he would think it very unnecessary, and very probably mock at the idea. And," he added, after a moment's hesitation, "I don't suppose anybody but those who really know him can guess what the sting of my father's mockery is."

"But your cousin faced it—didn't you tell us so?—about those billiards on Sunday. And you, who mean to be a soldier, cannot really be afraid."

There was a long silence, broken at last by Raymond, who remarked in a would-be careless tone—"After all, what is the particular use? It is only a repetition—the thing was done long ago, at one's baptism."

"But not by oneself. The confirmation vow ratifies the promise and makes it one's own. And that is not all: it opens the door to the other—the greatest privilege of all. Dear Raymond, won't you come? We may die, any of us, at any time, and to have neglected that"—

"I'll think about it, Phyllis," he answered gravely, and all three were silent for a while. They reached Hopedale Manor in good time for the early Sunday-dinner, after which Miss Hope

observed that her guests must contrive to amuse themselves for a couple of hours, while she and her sisters attended to their Sunday-classes.

“You will not mind returning home late?” she asked. “We have ‘high tea’ at half-past six, and there will be a glorious moon to-night.”

“All right,” they answered, nothing loth; and then Raymond, who knew the ways of the house, conducted his cousin to the drawing-room, leaving dining-room and library for the use of the different classes.

CHAPTER VIII.

TRUE COURAGE.

THAT drawing-room certainly appeared to Austin Blake to realise his dreams of a household Paradise. His mother, a good, but eminently hard and practical woman, had never taken much pains to beautify her own abode; nor indeed, had her taste been ever so good, was the small dingy house in a country town capable of much embellishment.

Holmewood, on the contrary, was too grand and stately, and had been too long devoid of feminine influence to have a cosy, liveable look about its large, stiffly furnished rooms.

Thus it was a real treat to the dreamy, sensitive boy to spend a few hours in Miss Hope's pretty bow-windowed drawing-room, every corner of which told some tale of womanly taste and refinement. The little conservatory, into which a glass door opened, was bright

with blossom: large crimson stars hung down from the taxonia, which grew and spread only too fast, and threatened to cover all the walls, while scarlet and white blossoms gleamed among the dark leaves of the camellias, and the delicate fragrance of primulas and early hyacinths filled the whole air. Here, too, the girls kept their pet birds, and a couple of joyous canaries were straining their throats to sing each other down, while Cicely's love-birds sat contentedly swelling out their pretty green breasts in the sunshine, and a veteran grey and rose-coloured parrot made quaint remarks to himself in tones of almost human distinctness.

Raymond sauntered in among the flowers, stole a bit of oak-leaf geranium for his button-hole, and stood for some time alternately teasing and fondling the sociable parrot.

When, growing tired of this, he rejoined his cousin, he was amused to find him leaning back in a low chair by the fireside, fast asleep, with a restful expression on his thin dark face, such as he had never hitherto seen it wear.

Too good-natured to disturb him (for Raymond could not but notice the contrast between his own strength and that of the slighter built, town-

bred lad), he sat down himself, and looked round for a book. The only one within reach happened to be a volume of George Herbert, and Raymond, who was wont to declare all poetry a bore, turned the leaves over vaguely, not expecting to be much interested. The quaint metre and old-fashioned language, first amused and then attracted him; he read on, half unconscious of the meaning of many of the words, until he came to the lines—

“Do all things like a man, not sneakingly ;
Think the king sees thee still, for his king does.”

How strangely this chimed in with what Phyllis had said to him during the homeward walk ! If his little counsellor was right—and he had more than once proved the wisdom of her judgment—was there not something “sneaking” in the dread, which he could not but own he felt, of broaching the subject of the confirmation to his father ?

The thought rankled in his mind, and he felt uncomfortably lowered in his own estimation. He tried to put it away from him, and read on for a time, until, chancing to look up, he met Austin’s eyes half sleepily fixed upon him.

"Awake, old boy?" said Raymond, laughing. "Don't apologise—there was no one to observe your slumbers but myself, though I hear the ladies coming now."

"Are you reading George Herbert?" his cousin inquired in surprise.

"It was the only book handy, so I took it up, not to disturb your repose. What a quaint old fellow he is! Manages to hit the right nail on the head though. Here is something for you—a description of the parson as he ought to be:—'The country parson is exceeding exact in his life, being holy, just, prudent, temperate, bold, grave in all his ways.' Does that suit your views as to your future career?"

"My ideal is higher than that," replied Austin, his pale cheek flushing as he spoke. "I think that a clergyman should combine in his character the courage of a soldier, the tenderness of a woman, and the wisdom of a sage."

"But," said Miss Hope, who, to Austin's discomfiture, had entered unperceived, and overheard this last speech, "is not that saying that one man must combine in himself the qualities of St. Peter, St. John, and St. Paul? And who

except the one perfect Man ever has, or could do that?"

"Yet I think he is right," cried Phyllis. "We must fall short—we know it—yet our aim should be perfection."

Involuntarily the two lads turned to look at the eager speaker, and in the same moment the thought crossed the mind of each—To what heights might not a man attain with such a heaven-sent creature as this for his inspiration? It was the vaguest passing fancy—they were all so young and thoughtless, so free and unconstrained in their intercourse—yet it was a moment destined to exercise a lasting influence over three lives.

But now Margaret summoned them round the piano, and soon the two sweet girlish voices were mingling with the manly tones in Wesley's spirited hymn, "Soldiers of Christ, arise!"

"Now that Lenten one with the change of key," said Phyllis.

"Christian, dost thou see them
On the holy ground;
How the troops of Midian
Prowl and prowl around?"

"I like that," said Raymond, as the last notes

died away; "there's something rousing and spirit-stirring in that sort of challenge to the powers of darkness. If the Archdeacon would give us hymns like that, instead of those stupid old droning chants, I could stand church much better."

"I must not let you stay much longer," observed Miss Hope; "the tea-bell will ring directly, and you have a long walk. But let us have the dear old evening hymn once before we part."

"I wonder," said Phyllis thoughtfully, when the last verse of the grand yet homely old hymn had been sung, "if any one ever could live so as to 'dread the grave as little as my bed.' It seems to me, however good one might be—however firm in faith—the shrinking must remain."

"I could fancy not minding the thought of death one scrap in the rush and excitement of battle," said Raymond; "but to die, as our brave fellows are doing now, of cholera, or that night-work in the trenches, all in cold blood, and with no enthusiasm to carry one through, *that* makes one shudder."

"You will think differently when you are

my age, and have seen others cross the dark river before you," observed Margaret. "The waters may be cold—the stream may seem deeper and wider to some than to others—but what matter is that when the light on the farther shore remains the same?"

"Do you remember young Middleton?" said Austin to his cousin, about an hour later, when they had started for their homeward walk. The moon had scarcely risen, and in the semi-darkness the boy felt less shy and reticent than usual, especially after his heart had been warmed by the congenial atmosphere of Hopedale.

"That delicate little chap in college? Yes, of course I do. By-the-by, I never heard if he got through his army exam."

"Yes; he was an ensign in the —th. Well, last month my mother had a letter from his people to say he had died of cholera. It seemed dreadful—ever so much worse than being killed in action; but they say he was as happy as possible, and never seemed to have a fear or doubt. If one could have faith like that"—

“Yes ; if one could !” echoed Raymond, with a sigh, while between his better aspirations the sneering contemptuous face of his father seemed to intervene, daring him to persevere in the narrower path of life.

CHAPTER IX.

CONFIDENCES.

“THINGS will go hard with that poor young creature, I am afraid, Miss Hope,” said a motherly woman in the village, who had been looking after poor Ellen Furse since the arrival of her two-days’ old baby. “That husband of hers is a bad one. He has taken to the drink worse than ever since Mr. Walters dismissed him from the farm, and if it hadn’t been for yours and the young lady’s kindness, the poor soul would not have a bit of firing, nor clothes to dress her baby in.”

“I can’t tell you how grieved I am about it, Mrs. Wood,” said Margaret sadly. “I could not keep the man on after what Walters told me of his fits of drunkenness. It was a dreadful pity. He was a fine young fellow when we first employed him—a good workman and kind to his horses—and we hoped poor Ellen

had chosen a good husband ; but since he took to these drinking habits he has so sadly altered."

"Ay, ma'am, 'tis the way with them all. I'll be bound he's up at the public now. He's never so much as tried to get a job of work since he was dismissed from your place—not that there are many to be had, for this is a slack time."

"You must not let her want for anything," said Miss Hope, as she rose to leave the cottage. "Ask the doctor what is best, and we will send it up. And please, Mrs. Wood, try to keep her quiet ; I am afraid she frets over John's being out of work and getting into these bad ways."

"The truth is, ma'am," said Mrs. Wood, coming closer for a confidential whisper, "none of us can't speak for certain, but it's my belief the poor thing has well-nigh starved herself. She was too proud to let any one know it, and could never bear to hear a word cast up against him, but I don't believe that she's had a bit of proper food for many a day. What money he had left must all have gone to pay for the drink !"

"But he used to be fond of her," said Miss Hope, dismayed. "Can he really have grown so heartless and cruel?"

"He's struck her before now, when the drink was on him," said Mrs. Wood. "Men as makes beasts of themselves one way don't stick at doing it in another. She never told me, not she! but I could see the state her poor face was in."

"Miss Phyllis told me something of this," said Margaret, much troubled. "I wonder if I could do any good by talking to him. Oh! how we want a clergyman on the spot! No other influence can ever reach these cases."

And as she walked home, a vision of Austin's ideal parish priest, with "the courage of a soldier, the tenderness of a woman, and the wisdom of a sage," watching over, teaching, and befriending her poor people, rose, as it so often did, before Margaret's mind. What a different place the village might become, with such a guide always at hand, with a church in which they could worship (without, as now, taking a long walk to reach it), with a school in which the children's young hearts and minds could be trained to better things! Some day,

perhaps, if Phyllis kept in her present mind, all these fair visions might be fulfilled.

But the child was very young—little more than sixteen. Could reliance be placed on resolutions so early formed?

Then, too, how lovely and loveable both she and Cicely were daily becoming. Was it not likely that both would marry, and, forgetting the home and the interests of childish days, find scope for their ardent spirits in another sphere?

And memories of the old days—laid aside and buried twenty-three years ago—rose before Margaret's mind: the days when her thoughts and aspirations began and ended with Gerard Anstruther; and, proud woman though she was, she would have bent her will unresistingly before his—in every matter except one. On that rock her love had suffered shipwreck—never, never to float in calmer waters again; and she would go down to her grave a lonely woman for the sake of him who had embittered those bright girlish days.

And he had loved her! She had known it when she broke the tie which united them—known it when, not six months after their part-

ing, he married that gentle, inexperienced, half-foreign girl, whose blind adoration never gained the reward of one real sign of tenderness, from the stern taskmaster whose service she had so joyfully entered.

Poor little Christine! Her short married life had been well-nigh as sad as that of the neglected, half-starved woman, whose cottage Margaret was even now leaving.

She had married a gentleman, and one who was famous for his courtly and chivalrous manners—she had all the luxuries that wealth can give; but is there nothing that a woman's happiness needs besides?

Cold, sarcastic words can wound a tender spirit more cruelly than blows—neglect starve a loving heart as effectually as want of actual food the body; and Christine had pined away within two years, from no actual disease but that of a broken heart.

Then Margaret thought of Christine's son, now almost grown to man's estate, and inheriting his father's charm of manner, with at least some portion of his mother's warm and loving heart. What had the future in store for him? On her death-bed, Christine had implored her

friend to be good to her boy; and heeding not what the world might say, Margaret had given the promise. Ill-natured gossips remarked on the lad's frequent visits to Hopedale, and wondered whether Margaret might be willing to overlook old scores, and accept at last the place she had rejected long ago. But Colonel Anstruther at least knew better. There was one woman in the world, and but one, for whom he could feel a respect, almost amounting to reverence; and though avoiding Hopedale himself, he never interfered with his son's frequent visits there, or put a veto on the influence that Margaret and her young sisters gradually obtained over the character of the impetuous, high-spirited lad.

This of course lessened as Raymond became a public-school-boy, and began to assume the manly airs belonging to that phase. But there was still a soft spot in his heart for Hopedale, and he would listen to advice there which he would have scouted from any one else, while in Margaret's prayers the name of the motherless lad came second only to those of her cherished sisters. Much and tenderly did she think of them all with a view to this approaching con-

firmation, now ever the foremost thought in the minds of the two young girls.

Did Raymond really care enough, to risk encountering his father's wrathful opposition to all religious matters? And if so, would he have the courage and steadfastness needed to carry his point?

Margaret's thoughts had formed themselves into a secret prayer that he might find help, when she was startled by hearing the quick tramp of a horse behind her, and a moment later, Raymond himself had trotted up, sprung to the ground, and was walking by her side, Black Douglas following, as his wont was, unled.

"This is luck," he said, squeezing her hand warmly. "I can't stay more than a few minutes, for I've left an awful stormy atmosphere at home, and poor Austin half annihilated by it."

"What has happened? Is your father displeased about the confirmation?"

"He doesn't seem to think it worth while to be displeased—he treats it just as an absurd fad, beneath a man's consideration. And, moreover, he wanted me to have gone up to my tutor's the very week before it takes place. But his manner

put my blood up, and I told him I was old enough to know my own mind on that or any other subject. I think he rather liked that, for he smiled grimly, and said I knew how to be cheeky enough, at any rate. But the next moment he turned round like a fury and said he'd not have me setting foot in the Arch-deacon's house after the way the old fellow had behaved to him; and he said—well, certainly, rather startling things about clergymen in general; and Austin, poor, foolish fellow! turned quite pale, and could not help giving a sort of gasp, and this brought my father's wrath down on him. He accused him of trying to come the Methodist dodge over me, and said no doubt this confirmation craze was of his originating. Austin is not accustomed to his ways as I am, and he cowered in a way that roused my father's contempt to a greater pitch than ever. I tried to get him out of the room, but couldn't manage it at first, he was so dazed with fright. At last, finding I didn't give in, my father told me to take my own way for an ungrateful scamp as I was. Whereupon I made him a polite bow, marched out, and ordered Douglas, to trot over here, as I had promised

to let Phyllis know what I settled to do. If you will tell her, I won't come any farther now—the sooner I get back to look after that poor little chap, the better for all parties.”

“But, Raymond, dear boy,” said Miss Hope, fairly bewildered by the impetuous boy's outpouring of confidence, “have you considered what you are doing? This is too solemn and important a step to be taken on no higher grounds than a fit of self-assertion—it is one that should be a means of bringing a blessing on your whole after-life. I wish—oh! from the bottom of my heart I wish—that your mother were alive to help and influence you.”

“I wish she were!” and the bright, eager face softened with a gleam of rare tenderness. “Poor little mother! I can't even remember her. But you were her friend, Miss Hope,” he added eagerly. “I've heard Stephens, our old coachman, say that you used often to come during her last illness; and I always fancy it must have been for her sake that you were so good to me as a child.”

There was a pause, and then Raymond said shyly, while turning his head away on pretence

of altering the bridle—"I say, I know I'm an awful ignoramus about these sort of matters—Austin thinks me a regular heathen, I can see—but could you tell me what sort of things one ought to read up for confirmation? I shall be able to get a ticket from Mr. Rivers, I suppose. Luckily the Archdeacon is going into residence, so that will save a fresh shindy with my father."

"I will send you some books with passages marked," said Margaret, deeply touched by the motherless boy's appeal for help, in his lonely ignorance. "I wish I could do more; but oh! Raymond, only God can see into our hearts and make them fit for Himself. Will you not ask Him to help you? Look at the collects for the first and fourth Sundays after Epiphany, for Easter Day, and for the ninth and twelfth Sundays after Trinity. I think those words will come home to you, if you use them with faith and perseverance."

"I'll try to remember; and now I must go. Thank you for listening so patiently."

He held her hand for a moment in his strong young grasp, sprang on his horse, and rode fast

away, Margaret looking after him with a strange mixture of pity and fond exultation.

It was a brave young heart—one that would hold its own in the fore-front of life's battle ; but would the victory be with the spirits of good or evil at last ?

CHAPTER X.

PRECEPT AND EXAMPLE.

COLONEL ANSTRUTHER'S mood had not improved on the following day, and Raymond, feeling himself still in disgrace, made no attempt to bear him company when he started for a ride immediately after luncheon.

The shooting season was nearly at an end, but he suggested to Austin that they might as well take a walk over the common and chance getting a snipe; and accordingly they started, accompanied as usual by an army of dogs.

The day was cold, but bright and healthful, and the sun shone cheerily on hill and moorland, gilding the leafless branches of the trees and the early buds of the abundant furze on the common.

The larks too were singing merrily, and the two boys felt their spirits rise as they gradu-

ally threw off the influence which Colonel Anstruther's displeasure had exercised over them both—rendering Austin timid and depressed, and Raymond unnaturally gay, in a reckless spirit of bravado.

Austin's visit was drawing to a close, and while longing to return home and be free from the constraint of his uncle's presence, he felt a strong regret at leaving Raymond—the cousin whom he had so little expected to find congenial, and who, almost from the first, had exercised a strange fascination over him.

This had not been the case at school, where, their pursuits being different, they had seen very little of one another; but here, in his own home, Raymond's protecting kindness, his strength and prowess in all manly exercises, his utter fearlessness of moral or physical danger, had made him a hero to the more timid lad; and as they took this, probably their last long walk together, he could not help giving utterance to what was in his mind.

“Raymond, you've been awfully good to me all this time. I often think what a muff I must seem compared to you, and how patient you have been with my stupidity.”

"Now don't begin palavering, old boy," and Raymond put his hand with a kindly roughness on his cousin's shoulder. "I'm not given to making pretty speeches—perhaps I don't believe in them when they are made—but I don't mind saying I shall miss you when you go away. We may not have many tastes in common, but at least we don't clash. And what is more, you have taught me something."

"Have I?" and the thin dark face lit up eagerly. "I think you know most things better than I do."

"Some few perhaps, but not all. But what I have learned from you is that there must be something in a profession which makes a nervous fellow like you bold enough to hold his own against my father. I've watched you, not only that first Sunday, but all the others since, and seen that you never even quailed in doing what you felt to be right. And if I'm not consistent myself, I can respect a fellow who is."

"I wish," said Austin, standing still and looking full at his cousin—"I do wish that you cared for—for"—

"Well, what? Come, say it out, and don't be afraid. I shan't be affronted."

“Well, you don’t know the good a fellow like you might do, if you chose, in the way of example. I always think it is one of the greatest misfortunes in the world that religion is supposed to be a thing for women and children, and poor weak creatures like me. It wasn’t so in the olden times—the disciples were strong, brave men; and later on it was a grand, noble, manly thing to run the risk of martyrdom. Yes, that is it! if once people could feel it *manly* to be religious—not to be ashamed of showing themselves servants of their Master openly to the world—how different the standard of right would be.”

“But one can’t blazon one’s profession—even if one has one—abroad,” said Raymond. “It is bad taste, if nothing else, to parade pious talk on common occasions.”

“I don’t mean that—oh! nothing like it. I wish I were not stupid, and could make you understand. When you are a soldier, you won’t always wear your uniform in every-day life, shall you? But you won’t keep it locked away in a cupboard, or want to put on a cloak to hide it when you are naturally expected to wear it. And it is just the same with religion.

Besides," he added very low, "there is one verse that always frightens me when I think of it."

"What is that?" Raymond asked.

"'Whosoever shall be ashamed of Me and of My words, of him shall the Son of Man be ashamed, when He shall come in His own glory and in His Father's.'"

There was a pause, and then Austin, whose courage seemed for once to have conquered his shyness and reserve, went on eagerly.

"And if you would but go to church, and come to Holy Communion—you don't know what good it might not do. Any one like you and Uncle Gerard *must* have influence over other people; you are both so strong—I don't mean mere bodily strength—but you have a sort of power of getting your wills carried out, and of drawing other people after you."

There was another silence, and Austin began to fear that he had given offence, especially when he saw that his cousin's face was deeply flushed, and his brows drawn together.

At last, however, Raymond said quietly—"You are a good fellow, Austin, and certainly no one can accuse you of not acting up to

your conscience. Perhaps, if I had had a mother, or even a sister like Phyllis Hope, things would have been different with me."

"Ah! she is an angel!" cried Austin, his pale face lighting up. "One cannot look at her without feeling that she is too good for this common work-a-day world."

"Too good, and too fair and fragile, I fear," said Raymond, with a sigh. "The mother died of consumption, and these girls are wonderfully like her. But Cicely, sweet and good as she is, is more like every-day mortals. Phyllis seems to belong to something higher. Child as she is, one finds oneself listening to her with a sort of reverence, even when she dilates on those wonderful castles in the air. And talk of influence! Where will you find any man or woman able to lead those rough village people as she can?"

"Yet it is disheartening work too, I am afraid," observed Austin—"the demon of drink has obtained such a mastery over the place. Look there, for instance!" as a man, coming from the direction of Walton Sudbury, was seen approaching, staggering with uneven gait along the road.

"That is Miss Hope's discharged waggoner," said Raymond—"drunk as usual, no doubt."

And Raymond would have passed the man in contemptuous disgust, but his cousin paused, struck by the look of bewildered distress on the flushed, drink-sodden face.

"For pity's sake, gentlemen, can you tell me if there's any ice in the house up at Colonel Anstruther's? My missis is terrible bad—the doctor doesn't think she'll get through the night—and ice is the only thing he ordered."

"Have you been to Hopedale?" asked Raymond, standing still and looking at him.

"Yes; the ladies are out, and the housekeeper hadn't any. I wish I could have seen Miss Phyllis—she was always good to poor Nelly—God bless her!"

"There's no time to lose," said Raymond sharply, "if your wife is really as ill as you say. Come back with us to Holmewood, and I'll see if there is any ice in the house. If not, where would be the nearest place for getting any?"

"None nearer than Templeton, six miles

off," said the man wearily. "Never mind, master. I'll have to trudge off there, and serve me right for the brute I've been to my poor girl!"

He gave a sobbing sigh, and Austin felt softened towards the man, who in point of years was really a lad little older than himself, but Raymond strode on without any relaxing of the stern expression which had settled on his face. Presently he said a word of apology to his cousin for his haste and silence.

"Don't walk faster than you like. I'm hurrying on because, if what this fellow says is true, it may be matter of life and death to get this ice."

"And if there is none in the house?"

"Why, then, I think I shall take the dog-cart and drive to Templeton for it. He'll be all day getting there on foot, and perhaps not be sober enough to bring it home either."

"Hush!" said Austin, seeing by the pained expression of their companion's face that the words had been overheard.

But John Furse only said mournfully—

"Never mind, sir; the gentleman's right

enough. If I hadn't given way to the drink, maybe she'd not be lying between life and death now. Nobody can say aught that is too bad for me."

"I wish," said Raymond impatiently, aside to his cousin, "that he would not be so meek. You can't hit a man when he's down."

There proved to be no ice at Holmewood, and Raymond's mare and dogcart were speedily ordered, while John Furse was sent home, with a promise that the ice should be brought without delay. Two hours later, as the unhappy man hung over his unconscious wife, now tossing and raving in brain fever, he was roused by the sound of rapidly approaching wheels. An old woman came to take his place at the bedside, and John hurried out to receive the heavy bag of ice, which Raymond handed to him out of the dogcart.

As the cousins drove away, they met the parish doctor, and Raymond stopped to ask his opinion of the poor woman's state. It was not hopeful. She was so much reduced by privation and suffering of mind and body, as to be quite unable to battle with so severe an illness; and there was great reason to fear that, even were

the fever subdued, she would sink from exhaustion.

“The husband seems awfully cut up,” added the doctor compassionately.

“Well he may be, the drunken ruffian!” cried Raymond indignantly. “He has brought it on himself.”

“Ah! Mr. Anstruther”—and the doctor (a kindly man, whom his profession had failed to harden into callousness) looked half sadly at the young speaker—“were we all judged strictly according to our deserts, who shall say what the result might be? Not that I mean to excuse this young fellow—far from it—but I fear he has brought a heavy punishment upon his own sins. He is really attached to his wife, and his helpless devotion during her illness has been touching to witness.”

Perhaps it was this speech which made Raymond speak more gently, when, by his desire, John Furse called on the following morning at Holmewood for a further supply of ice.

“They say she is sinking,” he reported, in answer to the inquiry after his wife; and there was no mistaking the heart-broken sorrow of the low, hollow voice.

"While life lasts there is hope," said Austin kindly; "don't despair yet."

The man looked up. "If I could think that, sir—if I could believe she would ever look at me with her own dear eyes again, and speak a word"—

"You would give up the drink and lead a different life?" said Austin eagerly. "Do promise—it is the one great wish she must have. You would like to do something to please her?"

"God knows I would! But"—despairingly—"it's too late; I can't live without it now."

"Then be content to die," said Raymond angrily. "If you are such a poor creature, life is not worth having at such a price."

"Why not take the pledge?" exclaimed Austin. "That would help you, if you felt yourself bound by that solemn promise. I don't mean take it for life, but for a time, till the habit is broken—a year, or two years, if you like."

Furse shook his head. "You don't know what you are asking of me, master."

"I believe I am asking you to save yourself—to give new life and hope to your poor wife,"

cried Austin, his pale face glowing with eagerness. "Do promise! If it will help you, I will pledge myself to do the same for the same length of time."

"You, sir?"—the stalwart workman smiled, as he surveyed the delicate town-bred lad—"you don't understand us ——shire folks. Now, if it were Mr. Anstruther here—he could never offer to do such a thing."

"What business is that of yours?" said Raymond, half angry, half amused; then adding, as if by a sudden impulse, "Come! I'll show you that you are mistaken. You take the pledge for a year, and my cousin and I will do the same. There are some things," he added, thinking of his father, "that may make it harder for me than for either of you."

A strange expression passed over Furse's face. "You would do this—yourself—for me, sir?"

"Well, why not? 'Tis no such great thing for one man to do to save another from destruction. Is it a bargain?"

"It is, sir," the man answered brokenly, "and by God's help I'll keep my share of it. I'll go straight off now and sign the papers,

and you shall see them when next you call. If my poor Nelly should get well, she will call this a blessed day's work."

There were tears in his eyes, and Raymond was surprised to find his own voice very husky as he muttered a few words of encouragement and assent. He was not sorry to cut the interview short, and could not reply graciously to his cousin's eager congratulation—

"Was I not right, Raymond? It was your influence that did it: if the poor woman lives, you will have saved her from no end of future misery."

CHAPTER XI.

CONFIRMATION VOWS.

THE confirmation day at Sudbury was as bright and beautiful as heart could wish—a day to make one think of Easter joys and blessings, of spring in its unfolding promise of yet greater beauty and growth, and of the young hearts beating high with hopes and aspirations, at that moment so full of the great and solemn vow they were about to renew. Over all the country hung the lovely veil of spring—apple-blossoms blushed faintly on the gnarled and weather-beaten branches, primroses still lingered in starry clusters here and there, while blue-bells in greater abundance threw a purple haze over the banks, the vivid green of the young fern-fronds gleamed among the darker hues, and contrasted with snowy tangles of stitch-wort and crimson spikes of campion. Overhead, among bowers of lovely budding green,

the birds sang their joyous welcome to the spring, while far above all the larks trilled their hymn of praise, mounting ever upward, farther and farther, into the vault of boundless blue.

Very full was Margaret Hope's heart as she drove through the flowery lanes with her two young sisters to the church, which was to be the scene of their confirmation.

Ever and anon she stole a glance at the fair young faces, as they sat silently, hand in hand, looking so young and child-like, with their sunny curls half hidden under the long white veils.

Confirmations were less frequent in those days than now, and many youths and maidens from the neighbouring villages were to be present at this one, besides a few older persons who had hitherto neglected the rite, and had now been led by their pastor's vigorous influence to become candidates.

As the carriage approached Sudbury, the sisters eagerly looked out for their own parishioners.

"There is John Furse," exclaimed Cicely. "I am so glad. I never felt sure either that he



THE CONFIRMATION.

would come, or that Mr. Everett would give him a ticket."

"I am glad," Margaret said; "that crisis in his poor wife's illness seems to have been the dawning of better things for them both. Now that he has so thoroughly given up drinking, and turned over a new leaf, I am in great hopes that there are happy days in store for poor Ellen."

"Ah! that was Raymond's doing," observed Phyllis. "John said he never could have had the courage to do it, if the gentleman hadn't shamed him into it by leading the way. I am sure Raymond cannot say now, as he used to do, that he has never done any good in the world."

"Ah! there he is!" as a tall figure, standing near the church door, came forward to help them out of the carriage.

A silent grasp of the hand was the only greeting, for there were many spectators, and eyes full of curiosity, not unmingled with admiration, watched the erect soldierly lad, as he walked into the church beside one of the white-robed girls.

Was it an omen?

Gossips shook their heads and whispered to-

gether that it was rumoured he was very wild—who could expect otherwise of Colonel Anstruther's son? And those sweet girls—great heiresses too—surely it was a pity to encourage such an intimacy. Meanwhile, Phyllis, all unconscious of the notice she was attracting, had slipped quietly into her place amongst the rows of white-capped or veiled maidens in the north aisle of the church, while Raymond's tall head was bent low beside the fustian-clad farm-lads on the other side.

This had been his first struggle for the right—his first victory over indolence, disinclination, and his father's contemptuous opposition; and deep in the young man's breast lay a feeling of restful content—of the knowledge that, of his own free will, he had made one step on the path leading to the gates where the words of welcome will be “Well done!”

Fellow-workers—fellow-soldiers in the great cause! could it be, that fragile gentle girl, and the young man in the pride of his strength and power? Yet it was her influence which had brought him here this day—her prayers perhaps which would win for him the blessing to come.

And now the Bishop and clergy had come into church, and in a few moments, choir and congregation were all joining together in the strains of

“Onward, Christian soldiers.”

Then came the opening address, and the preparatory questions and prayers, another hymn, and then a short space of silent prayer and intercession.

Deep was the hush that prevailed through the church, nor perhaps were there any present who could glance unmoved at that array of young, hopeful creatures, setting out in all their freshness to begin the battle of life.

Then, two and two, they rose and went up to kneel at the altar-rail and receive the Bishop's blessing. He was an old man, tender and fatherly in manner, and there was something in the address which followed that came home with special force to Margaret's orphaned sisters, and to Raymond in his dreary self-dependence. He touched too on the old note, that never fails to call forth an answering ring in the heart of an Englishman—

“Be strong and of a good courage! Never

be ashamed to own yourselves followers of Christ. He is a Master who fails not to stand by His servants if they are true to Him. Carry His banner ever forward in the battle-front—be faithful unto death, and He shall give you a crown of life.”

These words were sounding still in Raymond's ears, as, the blessing spoken, he knelt on, scarcely praying—not even conscious of thought, only that a sense had awakened within him of new resolve, of a strength not his own, that was to be with him through life. He roused himself at last, to hear the vigorous manly tones beside him singing—

“O Jesus, I have promised
To serve Thee to the end ;
Be Thou for ever near me,
My Master and my Friend.
I shall not fear the battle
If Thou art by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway
If Thou wilt be my Guide.”

As they were leaving the church, Raymond lingered for a moment behind the rest. He had seen a marked and wistful expression on the face of one of the elder candidates, whom he now recognised as John Furse. Some instinct

of fellow-feeling in his present mood prompted him to hold out his hand to the man, with a muttered word of satisfaction at seeing him there. It was seized and grasped with silent vehemence, and the little episode passed unseen, except by one pair of eyes, by whom it was treasured as another instance of Raymond's kindly heart.

"Come with us," said Phyllis softly; and he yielded, and spent the rest of that day at Hope-dale—a day long to be remembered in its spring beauty and peace.

On the following, he travelled up to London with his father, to begin work with the army tutor, with whom, as Colonel Anstruther said, he ought to have been settled a week before.

CHAPTER XII.

A FIRST BALL.

MORE than a year had passed since the Sudbury confirmation, and there was great excitement at Hopedale over another and very different event—namely, the appearance of Cicely and Phyllis at their first grand piece of gaiety—the Templeton Assize Ball.

It was the principal county gathering of the year, and eagerly looked forward to in the days when balls were fewer, and distances by rail more thought of, than they appear to be now.

Cicely, who was eighteen, had refused to come out until her sister could be with her, and the bond between the two was so close and twin-like (save that the younger girl took the lead in most matters) that Margaret willingly consented to wait. She herself had cared but little for society for the last fifteen or sixteen years, but her heart beat with a sort of motherly

pride as she walked up the long ball-room, conscious that admiring eyes were following the two graceful figures in white on either side of her.

Partners were forthcoming in plenty, and Cicely's card was soon full from beginning to end, but Phyllis was wayward and fanciful in persisting in her resolve to keep several spaces unfilled.

"I don't like to feel myself tied down and unable to change my mind at the last moment," was the only answer she would give to repeated remonstrance, but her blue eyes often wandered to the door, and as the evening advanced her spirits seemed inclined to flag. All at once, in the middle of a waltz, she astonished her partner by an exclamation, while her lovely wild-rose colouring deepened to a degree that roused his curiosity. Following the direction of her eyes, his own lighted on a tall young active figure who had just arrived, and was eagerly watching each revolving pair of dancers.

"I declare, there is Anstruther!" was his surprised exclamation. "I had no idea he was likely to be here—thought he could not have got his exam. over in time."

"He always promised to come to our first ball," was the eager happy answer, and the next moment Raymond, striding through the throng, was at her side.

"Kept my word, little one, you see. What dance are you going to give me as a reward?"

"Oh, Raymond! I *am* glad—how did you manage to get away?"

"The exam. is just over, and I jumped into the first train I could get hold of—got to Templeton at 9.30, had a mouthful to eat, dressed, and came off here post-haste."

"And have you passed? Are the lists out yet?"

"I fancy I'm all right, but can't be sure for another week or two."

Phyllis's partner here rather reproachfully interposed. "Come, Anstruther, this isn't fair. You are cheating me out of half my only dance with Miss Hope. There ought to be a rule against old friends turning up promiscuously in ball-rooms."

"The second 'Lancers' then, Raymond, if you like," said Phyllis wistfully. "Yes, Mr. Ashford, it is *too* bad, and I am very rude, but it

was such a delightful surprise after we had almost given him up."

Meanwhile Raymond, wending his way through the dancers, had successfully sought out Miss Hope, and carried her off to have some tea. More than one questioning glance followed the handsome dark-eyed lad and the stately middle-aged lady, both taller than their fellows, as they passed down the room.

"How like his father! Wonder if she remembers how often she has danced with *him* in this very room? Strange thing her making such a pet of the boy—so unwise too, with those pretty, attractive young sisters."

"Why?" asked some one, strange to the neighbourhood. "He is a handsome, pleasant-looking fellow, and heir to a good property, is he not?"

"Yes; but Margaret Hope has had cause to dread the name of Anstruther, and they say this youth is following direct in his father's footsteps."

"He has a bright open expression," observed the other speaker. "I should find it hard to believe anything very bad of him."

"My nephew, who was at the same army

tutor's, used to describe him as the wildest of the wild. He was always in scrapes for gambling, going off to races, and so forth, and so idle that nothing but his very great innate cleverness could give him a chance of passing his examination. I should be very sorry to see *my* daughters on terms of intimacy with Raymond Anstruther."

If a similar misgiving crossed Margaret Hope's mind, it was dispelled for the moment by the fascination of that bright sunny manner, and Raymond's evident delight at the meeting.

He provided her with tea, and then filling a glass of sherry for himself, tossed it off with a mischievous laugh at her expression of surprise.

"Could not keep that farce up, my dear lady mentor—the fates decreed otherwise. I was only committed for a year by way of experiment, you know."

"I am glad John Furse does not see it in the same light," said Margaret gravely; then relaxing, "but I daresay it was difficult and awkward for you, especially in your profession. But are you a soldier at large yet?"

"Not quite; but I hope a few weeks more

will see my name in the *Gazette*. What ages it is since I have seen you or any one in the dear sleepy old county! My father has been up to town now and then, and we've spent a few days there together off and on—and then in the summer, as you know, we took a Scotch trip together—but barring that, I've stuck to my cramming pretty closely. Don't you think I've been a good boy, and deserve some little reward?"

The handsome young face, looking so frankly and pleadingly into her own, was very fascinating to Margaret Hope; but remembering certain vague rumours and warnings, she steeled herself to answer gravely—"That depends upon what you call being a good boy. And after all, most 'rewards,' as you call them, are within your own reach."

"Hunting and shooting, to wit? Dear old Douglas will be glad to follow the hounds once more! But life is made up of something more than these."

"I am glad you think so; but I have finished my tea, and the music is stopping. I must hasten back to my post, or the girls will have cause to complain of a runaway chaperon."

The first bar of the "Lancers" had scarcely sounded, when Raymond appeared to claim his promise; and silencing all misgivings for the moment, Margaret's heart throbbed with pride as the two young creatures, undoubtedly the handsomest couple in the room, walked off in quest of a *vis-à-vis*.

"Where is your cousin now?" was Phyllis' first question, as they took their places.

"Austin? At Oxford. Did you not hear of his getting a scholarship? It is a first-rate thing for the old fellow, and he well might be cock-a-hoop about it, if he had it in him, but he hasn't. That was his only fault, being so awfully meek that I used to long to shake him, and should do so still more *now*, I'm afraid."

"Why *now*?"

"Oh! I've seen more of the world—its bad side and its good; one can't live in a glass case all one's life. But it is not a bad old world on the whole, when one is young and jolly."

"And afterwards?" said Phyllis softly, yet in a musing sort of tone, as if speaking rather to herself than her companion.

"Time enough to consider," he answered lightly. "But tell me all about yourselves; how are the ponies, and the village, and all your old hobbies? Are they neglected and forgotten, now that you and Cicely have developed into fashionable young ladies?"

"We should not be good for much if they were," said Phyllis indignantly. "Only four years now to wait for the church! But it seems dreadfully long when one remembers how it is needed."

"The people go on as usual?"

"Oh, yes; but one or two have improved certainly. John Furse has been good to his wife ever since you persuaded him to take the pledge. That *was* a good day's work, Raymond!"

"I!"—he coloured and turned aside, then with an effort said—"I couldn't keep that up on my own score, Phyllis. The fellows at my tutor's chaffed too intolerably, so after the year I went back to old habits. You see, I can't accept your praise on false pretences."

There was a short silence, and then the girl said—

"How did you like your life in London? I

remember you were rather low at the prospect."

"Oh! it was jolly enough when one got used to it. My tutor was not a bad fellow, by any means—for a parson. Perhaps he would have astonished Austin a little by some of his practices, but his Sunday sermons were unexceptionable. I never heard such eloquence—it quite appealed to one's feelings—only it was a little difficult to put aside one's Saturday night impression of the man, because he appeared a few hours later in the most correct form of surplice. Wyndham (he was my principal chum) and I often used to discuss the transformation problem."

Phyllis' soft eyes looked up questioningly. "Do you mean that he was a hypocrite? It sounds dreadfully like it; but one cannot bear to believe such things of a clergyman."

"I fear they are but human, like the rest of us, little one. But I must get into a more orthodox style of conversation, now that I have your dear little demure face to remind me of my shortcomings. Oh, Phyllis! it does one good to be near you once more."

There was no answer to this—only the half

sad, half puzzled expression which during the whole dance had been gathering over the sweet face, and which did not pass away when, after a couple of turns round the room, he resigned her to another partner.

“You will keep two of the supper-dances for me? That is right; you really are a little trump not to have filled your card up. Now I suppose I must do my duty and please the governor by being civil to the county magnates—the feminine portion at least.”

He strolled away, with his easy youthful assurance, and Phyllis saw him welcomed by more than one great lady with daughters on their promotion.

“Such a fine young fellow,” was the general verdict, “and heir to that good property—what wonder if his head be a little turned? And as to being wild, who could expect anything else of a son of Gerard Anstruther? Many a reckless lad developed into a good soldier, and ultimately a very creditable member of society, and this one would have plenty of time to sow his wild oats.”

And like everything else, the County Ball came to an end in due course of time; and as

they set out on their homeward drive, each of the three Hopedale ladies turned to take a last look at the tall athletic figure standing on the hotel steps, debating in his mind whether it were worth while to "turn in" for the fragment of sleeping hours that yet remained.

CHAPTER XIII

A YOUNG SOLDIER.

THE gaieties in that quiet country neighbourhood were not very frequent, and it being before the days of lawn tennis, social afternoon gatherings were less common than they are now. However, croquet was coming into fashion, and though young men usually voted it "slow," it was a pleasant out-door amusement for girls, and an excuse for friends to meet on fine afternoons.

Margaret Hope sighed a little when a favourite rose-bush was transplanted, and her smooth expanse of emerald lawn defaced by those unsightly hoops; but the young folks talked her over, and she was after all very glad of any open-air amusement in which Phyllis could take part without fatigue, for while the girl's flower-like beauty became every day more per-

fect, her sister saw with pain that her strength rather diminished.

A gallop on Titania was almost always followed by pain in the side; and although her interest in village matters increased daily, it was quite evident that she was unfit for much cottage-visiting, or for the sad sights that too frequently came before her.

Still she was not ill, and Margaret and Cicely comforted each other by assurances that the languor that sometimes came over her was only the effect of some chance extra fatigue.

“No one *could* be ill who had that lovely colour, and whose voice was so clear and sweet, like the carolling of a happy bird.”

“Yet she *does* look delicate,” said the Arch-deacon’s wife one day, during a confidential chat with her friend. “Why do you not take both her and Cicely abroad for the winter? It would be a capital way of finishing their education, and would be a pleasant change for you too, Margaret. Besides, there might be other advantages.”

The mysterious gesture accompanying these words prevented Margaret from asking an ex-

planation at the moment, but her curiosity was excited, and she presently found an excuse for sending the girls out of the room, and then smilingly inquired what Mrs. Trueman had meant.

“My dear, you surely must see the imprudence of letting those sweet girls be so much in the company of that unfortunate young man. No one can grieve more than the Archdeacon and myself at the sad spectacle of his downward career; but with such antecedents, what can you expect?”

“Are you speaking of Raymond Anstruther?” said Margaret quietly. “I have heard nothing which makes me inclined to discard him as an acquaintance—nay, rather a friend—in whom I have taken a warm interest since his earliest years.”

“Is it possible that you do not know the tales that his fellow-pupils recount of his wildness and utter want of principle? Do you not know that he drinks, gambles, and is addicted to every vice common to the age? Nay, Margaret, this is carrying blind indulgence too far. When he has entrapped one of your charges into a love affair and broken her heart,

perhaps too late you will regret that you were not more amenable to advice."

"I never condemn a friend on hearsay evidence," said Margaret stoutly, though her heart sank a little as she recalled some of Raymond's looks and expressions on the night of the Templeton ball. "But," she added, with rather cold dignity of manner, "you are quite mistaken in the conclusion you insinuate with regard to Cicely and Phyllis. To begin with, they are too young—too utterly guileless, for a thought of love-making to have occurred to them—Raymond, too, is a mere boy; they have been like brother and sisters all their lives, and it would be a thousand pities to trouble their young minds with thoughts of such folly."

Mrs. Trueman shook her head and held up her hands in despairing protest.

"Blind, blind—utterly, hopelessly infatuated! Well, I shall say no more; but perhaps some day, when it is too late, you will remember I acted the part of a friend, and gave you timely warning."

With which words the worthy lady departed, leaving Margaret disturbed and anxious, though

trying still to take refuge in peaceful incredulity.

She took an opportunity of mentioning Raymond's name, and in a moment the blood mantled over Phyllis' fair cheek and throat; but that was nothing unusual, for since she had been less strong, any sudden question or remark would always make her colour change. And her reply was so frank and gay, so free from all bashful embarrassment, that Margaret felt at ease once more. It was strange that it was only with regard to her *youngest* sister that she felt even a shade of anxiety on this score.

And at last came the long-remembered day, when Black Douglas' hoofs clattered up to the door, and Raymond, boyish and eager as ever, dashed into the morning-room waving aloft a long blue envelope.

"It's come—I am one of the country's defenders in good earnest now!" and he brandished the paper containing Her Majesty's approval of Ensign Raymond Anstruther's being gazetted to the —th regiment, now waiting orders for India.

"India!" The girls' faces fell, and the

words of happy congratulation died on their lips.

Only Margaret spoke, half-reproaching herself the while for experiencing a certain feeling of relief. "My dear boy, I am so glad, since you are pleased. Of course we shall grieve to part with you, but India is a grand field for a young soldier's career, and the years will pass quickly before, please God, we welcome you back—a bronzed and travelled hero."

"India!" cried Cicely eagerly. "Oh, Raymond, you will see Calcutta, and the Ganges, and the temples at Delhi; and shoot tigers, and bring home glorious birds and beetles. How delightful it is to be a man!"

But Phyllis never spoke; only her blue eyes shone as Raymond's hand sought hers in turn for its shake of congratulation, and almost crushed the little white fingers in his ardent grasp.

"What does your father say?" inquired Margaret presently. "He will miss you sadly, I fear."

"Perhaps, a little; but he is an ardent soldier still, poor old dad, and I think he is well pleased. Besides, by what I hear from

other sources, it is not altogether certain that the —th will get sailing orders so soon as this implies. I should be very well content to have a little delay, for its present quarters are especially jolly ones, and one is in no hurry for expatriation."

"Have you any friends in the regiment?"

"Talbot, a chum of mine at Eton, has a brother who is now lieutenant, and Willis, who was at my tutor's for one term, has just got his commission in it."

"The —th!" exclaimed Margaret thoughtfully; "surely that is the regiment into which Captain Jerningham exchanged."

"Jerningham? To be sure—he is major, and a regular old martinet too, I believe. Do you know him?"

"I did, years ago, and his wife. She was my old school-friend, Mary Johnstone, and a dear, good, warm-hearted girl in the days of our friendship. I will write and tell her."

"Thanks," said Raymond a little awkwardly, "but you see a subaltern and the major's wife have not much to say to one another. I mean—it is very kind of you," he added, smiling, "but"—

"But you are afraid my friend may be a dull old fogey, unsuited to you and your gay friends? Ah! Master Raymond, what else do you expect from an old maid's circle of acquaintances?"

"I expect nothing but what is delightful from a friend of Miss Hope's," replied Raymond, with the old-fashioned gallantry that made him so charming to women older than himself. "But I cannot stay now; the poor old governor wants to see as much of me as he can these last few days, and indeed there is plenty to do."

"Do you take Black Douglas?" asked Cicely.

"Ah, no! Poor fellow! he will miss me, and I him, but such luxuries are not for subs in a marching regiment. My father will make him his own riding-horse, I think. They look uncommonly well together. You know what a seat and hand he has. The effect is that of a stately old crusader on his charger."

Another fortnight, and the bright young fellow was gone, and the sisters at Hope-dale settled down to their daily life, elder as well as younger feeling conscious of a certain

dreary flatness, as they missed the cheery voice which had of late brought them almost daily tidings from the outside world.

Not that their life was deficient in interest—there were always “books, work, and healthful play” to be had in abundance at Hopedale; and besides, the scheme which was the crowning hope and delight of Phyllis’ heart was beginning to assume definite proportions.

In two years and a half she would be of age, and the building of the church at Walton Sudbury (if she still so minded) might be begun.

Already the site was chosen, and the sisters deep in works on church architecture, Margaret warmly entering into the plan, while considering herself bound in conscience to repress rather than emulate the two young ardent spirits.

“Have you thought, darling, what it is that you are giving up?” she once asked. “It will take *all* your fortune to build and endow this church and vicarage. Remember you are leaving yourself barely enough to live on—

nothing to bring as dowry to your husband, if you marry."

"It will be giving it to God and our poor people," the girl answered simply, and her face glowed with a joy which was scarcely earthly in its brilliancy.

CHAPTER XIV.

BAD NEWS.

THE months sped on, and one morning late in the summer Margaret received a letter from her old school-friend, to whom she had given Raymond a note of introduction.

“MY DEAR MARGARET,—I have been very anxious to comply with your wishes, and show any kindness in my power to your young friend Mr. Anstruther. George was much taken with him at first, and indeed so is every one who comes under the spell of that most fascinating manner. He is so handsome, too, as well as charming, that it would be little wonder, at his age, if he were spoiled.

“I do not think, however, that this is the case; he is wonderfully free from conceit, and

is as pleasant and natural as any boy fresh from school. But I am sorry to say that his faults appear to be of a very much more serious nature, and, young as he is, he seems likely to become a dangerous influence in the regiment. Probably many gay young officers of the present day would call my George strait-laced and rigid in his notions of right and wrong, but few go as far in the opposite direction as young Anstruther, and his very popularity and attractiveness make him more dangerous to his admirers.

“Did you know that he openly professes to disregard all religion? To me this is far more terrible than the fact that he gambles recklessly, drinks more than is prudent, and is hand in glove with the *only* black sheep in the regiment—a man rather older than himself, but possessing far less influence or decision of character.

“I fear this letter will grieve you, but I could not but write, remembering the almost motherly interest your letter expressed in this young fellow.

“I daresay he looks upon me in the light of a Mrs. O’Dowd. Of late I have seen but

little of him personally, but I cannot help feeling sorry for the poor lad, and anxious to save him from going utterly to the bad, if possible. Can you do any good by writing to him? If so, do not mention this letter, as I don't want to be considered a mischievous old meddler.

“George desires his kind remembrances, and wants to know if your little half-sisters have grown up as pretty as their childhood promised. I wish there were any chance of our meeting, but we are still looking for the summons to India, and George's leave is matter of uncertainty.

“Forgive me the pain this letter will cause you, and believe me always, your old friend,

“MARY JERNINGHAM.”

There were very seldom any secrets among the loving trio at Hopedale, and Margaret was for once unmindful of the effect that tidings such as she had just read might produce on her young sisters. She was sitting under her favourite walnut tree, and the letter—the only one received by that post—had fallen from her hand, while such a look of sorrow and regret

had settled on her face, that Cicely, when she joined her, anxiously inquired what was the matter.

Phyllis asked no question, but she picked up the letter, and her colour fled as she glanced at the post-mark.

"Is it bad news of Raymond—is he ill?" Cicely inquired quickly.

"He is not ill; but it *is* bad news, a grievous disappointment, for I looked for better things; but you may read for yourselves."

The two bright heads were bent over the letter together, and then again there was a mournful silence. At last Cicely asked—

"Will you do as Mrs. Jerningham suggests, sister? Will you write?"

"No; I think not. He would only think I was taking an unwarrantable liberty, and be angry. I have no right to advise or influence him. But we can do one thing, dears—when we pray for 'all such as have erred and are deceived.'"

"Deceived! Yes," said Phyllis sadly, "he told us himself of the false teaching he had had—of his tutor's hypocrisy. Poor Raymond! He has grown to think all religion must be

cant ; and in losing *that*, the best aim of his life is gone."

"I wish his cousin Austin could be more with him," observed Cicely. "He is so good, and so humble-minded with it, that Raymond respects his high principle."

Not long after this conversation, the news reached Hopedale that Colonel Anstruther was ill with an attack of suppressed gout ; and one morning, to their surprise, the garden-gate was opened, a familiar step sounded on the gravel, and Austin Blake stood before them.

He had grown and developed much during the eighteen months that had elapsed since they last met, and though never likely to be so fine a man as his cousin, the appearance of delicacy and insignificance had passed away. He was now rather tall, slightly made, but active, and with an intellectual but anxious cast of countenance—the look of one who is searching after knowledge, but has not yet climbed high enough to satisfy his own aspirations.

After a few words of cordial greeting, he explained that his mother had been alarmed at the accounts of her brother's health, and know-

ing that Raymond was unable to leave his regiment, had persuaded her son to write and offer to be with his uncle for a time. The proposal was accepted—not very graciously.

“But I think,” said Austin diffidently, “that he finds it less dreary than being absolutely alone. Raymond, too, has written to thank me, and say how glad he is to hear of my being at Holmewood.”

“That is right,” said Margaret, warmly. “I am sure they must both think it kind. But can you spare the time? You are reading for ordination, are you not?”

“I get a fair amount of quiet time to myself in the day, and for the rest there is no pressing haste. And I cannot help fancying sometimes it is some comfort to that poor, solitary man to have a bit of young life about the house—however little congenial he may find my company.”

“Does he still say such terribly bitter things?” asked Cicely sympathetically.

“Not often, or else perhaps it is that I have a harder shell now, and am not so foolishly afraid of him. We actually had an argument last night; and though of course he grew irri-

table, I think it amused him to feel he was demolishing me, and so he forgot his pain for a little while."

"But were you demolished?"

"Not really, though prudence and respect for my elder made me subside after a time. But don't let us talk of my uninteresting self any more. I want to hear of all you have been doing. It seems so very, very long since I was here, and yet there is the dear old home-like feeling about this place that I never found in any other."

"I like to hear you say that," observed Margaret kindly; and then a long desultory talk followed over matters past and present, and he inquired if the church scheme still existed, and was eagerly called on to give an opinion on the sketches produced.

"It will be a blessing, if ever it can be carried out," said Margaret, when the girls had left her and her guest for a few minutes alone. "My heart often aches over the old and sick, the children, and those who need teaching of the highest sort—all so forsaken and neglected, like sheep without a shepherd. But I dare not look forward with any cer-

tainty yet. Phyllis is so young, and much may happen."

"She will not fail in this great work," the young man answered, with a confidence that almost seemed prophetic. "But I must go now, or my uncle will miss me. Good-bye!" and with only a hasty farewell to the girls he was gone.

Little did any one at Hopedale guess at the dull aching pain of the heart which (first felt long ago, and put aside as a boyish dream) that visit had rekindled into bitterness.

"She is fairer, sweeter, more like an angel than ever," he said to himself, as he walked home through the golden corn-fields ripening in the glorious August sun. "Raymond had so much to make life beautiful and full of bright prospects—must this, the best of all, be given to him also?"

On his return to Holmewood, he found the butler anxiously watching for him at the front door.

"The Colonel is asking for you, Mr. Blake," he said, as soon as Austin came within hearing. "He has been very anxious about your coming in."

"I'll go to him at once, Reynolds. I am sorry to have been so long away, but it was too hot to walk fast. Nothing the matter, I hope?"

"I am afraid there is, sir," was the reply. "I could not quite catch what the Colonel said, but I fear there is bad news of some sort of Mr. Raymond."

"I trust not. God forgive me my envious thoughts," muttered Austin to himself, as hastily springing up the stairs, he knocked at his uncle's door.

"Come in!" said a voice, tremulous from anxiety and irritation. "So you are back at last. I wish you had had the consideration to give me notice before setting off to tramp over the country. There were plenty of horses at your disposal, and you need not have taken such an infernal time."

"I am sorry," said Austin gently; "it was such a glorious morning, that I woke early and set off for an early ramble. Is anything the matter?"

"Matter enough. See there"—throwing him a letter—"my boy is hurt, dying perhaps, and here am I chained by the leg and not able to go to him. I'd give my old life a dozen times

over to save his—my brave lad ! And to think of lying here like a log, and getting no tidings but these confounded telegrams and letters from folks who don't care whether he lives or dies. If you say one word to me of resignation or trust in Providence, Austin Blake, I'll turn you out of my house, and never see your face again. I can't stand your pious cant at such a time as this."

Silently, in order to avoid causing fresh irritation, Austin took up the letter. It was from the colonel of Raymond's regiment, and contained, in truth, the account of a most alarming and terrible accident.

Young Anstruther, in company with his friend and constant companion Talbot, had been returning from a bachelor dinner-party at a house some miles from the barracks. They were driving tandem, and the leader was well known to be a very spirited animal, and nervous at night. Anstruther was, however, so good a whip, that no thought of danger had occurred to any one.

But reading between the lines, Austin saw what the father did not, that on this particular occasion the young fellow had evidently not

been in a state for such a hazardous undertaking. The horses had bolted, the dogcart overturned upon a heap of stones, and Talbot appeared to have been killed on the spot. The groom, picking himself up, bruised and shaken, managed to crawl to the nearest cottage for assistance, and Anstruther was found bleeding and unconscious, and as soon as possible carried back to barracks.

The colonel's letter went on to say that the injuries were, it was hoped, less severe than at first appeared, and no bones were broken, although there was undoubted concussion of the brain, and the shock to the whole system had been severe. It was desirable that the death of his friend should for the present be concealed from him, as it was feared that he would feel it deeply.

"We are all sorry for your lad," the letter concluded; "he is a general favourite, and there is no one who would not miss his bright face and pleasant ways. If you are able to come and look after him, I shall be pleased to put you up; if not, we will do our best for him, and keep you informed of his progress."

"Have you telegraphed since this came?" asked Austin, laying down the letter.

"Yes, of course; I sent at once, and pre-paid the answer, but the lazy rascals take so long getting back. Ah! here it is!" and he snatched the yellow envelope from the butler's hand, and hurriedly read aloud—

"Partial return of consciousness, but not much improvement. Not likely to be much change for some days."

"Uncle," said Austin eagerly, "since you are not able to go to Raymond, will you send me instead? I *do* know a little about nursing; the fellow in the rooms next mine had brain fever last term, and I used to sit up with him. Will you let me go? Indeed I would do my best, and send you constant bulletins; and," he added half timidly, "Raymond was like a brother to me when I was last here."

A half-uttered contemptuous refusal was begun, but suddenly checked. Colonel Anstruther looked searchingly into his nephew's face, and felt himself strangely moved by the pleading of the dark grey earnest eyes."

"It won't be much use," he muttered, "but 'tis better than nothing, and the lad means

kindly. Well, go then, if you like, and tell my boy to do his best to live for his old father's sake. I shall go to him as soon as this cursed foot of mine will let me cross the room."

"I can catch the 3.30 train by starting at once," said Austin eagerly, "and reach —— some time to-night. You shall have a telegram as soon as possible on my arrival. May I order the dogcart?"

And without waiting for permission, he hurried away to make a few brief preparations, leaving Colonel Anstruther not a little surprised at the readiness and promptitude of "that dreamy, mooning lad of my sister's."

CHAPTER XV.

ILLNESS AND ANXIETY.

IN a darkened room, tossing in fevered semi-consciousness and great pain, to which his healthy, active young frame was wholly unaccustomed, lay Raymond Anstruther.

A tall man, with iron-grey hair, and stiff military bearing, but kindly voice and hand, sat by his bedside, and continually changed the wet bandages on his burning head, or held cooling drink to the parched lips.

The window was open, and as the sound of the evening bugle-call sounded in the court below, the patient half sprung up, and his nurse uttered a suppressed exclamation of vexation.

“Lie still, my dear fellow. I am sorry you were disturbed. I hoped you were getting a little sleep.”

A weary impatient groan was the only reply, and presently the surgeon paid his evening

visit, asked a question or two of the friendly watcher, and shook his head as he tried in vain to count the pulsations of the flying, irregular pulse. Major Jerningham summoned Raymond's servant to take his place for a moment, and followed the doctor to the door.

"Is there any hope?" he asked sorrowfully.

The doctor hesitated.

"In ordinary cases, I should answer—none. But this lad has such a splendid constitution, and until the last few months he has led such a healthy life, that there are great rallying powers. I think it just possible he may struggle through. He does not know about poor Talbot yet, I hope?"

"No. I am dreading the first question. I think I shall stay with him to-night. Any one of the other youngsters would readily take my place, but I have not much trust in their discretion."

"True! he will feel it dreadfully, I fear. We have just had a miserable scene with poor Sir Lionel; he is very bitter against Anstruther, for causing, as he says, his son's death."

"He is come, then? Not Lady Talbot, I hope?"

"Oh, no! She is utterly prostrate, poor thing, and no wonder. Her son was the very idol of her heart, and both she and his father seem to have been blind to all his faults. Sir Lionel is frantic that it is *his* boy's life, and not Anstruther's, that has paid the penalty of their rashness."

"I don't suppose, from all I hear, that one was more fit to drive those horses by night than the other," observed the Major.

"One can't say a harsh word of that poor fellow who lies dead now, yet I always did, and do think, that he was Anstruther's tempter to a great extent. The lad was steady enough when he first joined."

Two hours later the patient night-watch was again interrupted by the soldier-servant, who with cautious step and voice came to inform the Major that a young gentleman, Mr. Anstruther's cousin, had arrived, and wished to see the invalid immediately. Almost at the same moment the door was again softly opened, and a young man entered, bending his head silently in answer to the Major's greeting.

How strange it seemed to Austin Blake to stand by that bedside, and look down at the

wreck which a few hours had wrought! Could this helpless being, groaning with pain and fever, be the bright athletic Raymond, on whose protective strength he had himself in a measure been accustomed to lean? He stood lost in thought, until roused by a touch on the shoulder.

Major Jerningham beckoned him to the door, and said kindly—

“I am glad you have come. When your cousin is himself again, he will like having one of his own people to nurse him. But you are tired out now, and must have some food and rest before you can be any good as a nurse.”

“I should like to stay to-night,” said Austin eagerly. “I had some sleep in the train, and as much as I wanted to eat at Crewe. Pray let me sit up with my cousin. I am used to nursing, and I do not think he will mind having me.”

“Very well. If you want any help, Jackson will be at hand: he is a handy fellow, and knows his master’s ways. Then I’ll go home and report progress to my wife, and be here as soon as I can to-morrow, after early parade. That is his medicine: get him to take it every three

hours if you can, and as much lemonade and iced water as he likes. And keep changing the cold bandages on the head. I don't think there are any other directions. If he should have a return of consciousness, and begin to ask questions, answer as cautiously as you can. Good-night! I hope to find him better in the morning;" and with a warm shake of the hand Major Jerningham departed.

Austin's touch was lighter, his voice better attuned to a sick-room than that of the worthy Major; and although Raymond showed no apparent consciousness of the change of nurses, it was evident that he grew less restless as the night wore on, and once or twice his cousin hoped that he slept for a little while.

The early August dawn was peeping in, and Austin was endeavouring to draw the curtain more closely over the open window, when a voice, low and weak, but perfectly natural, called him by name.

Hastening to the bedside, he met the brown eyes, which looked so strange without their usual merry sparkle, fixed steadily upon him.

"When did you come?" was the first question.

"Only a few hours ago," said Austin, sitting quietly down, and trying to possess himself of the burning hand lying outside the bed-clothes.

"You are better, I think, dear old fellow."

"Some water, please." Then, as Austin replaced the glass, he asked doubtfully, "My father has not been here, has he?"

"No; he will come soon—when he is better. You know he is still quite laid up with the gout."

"Ah! yes; I suppose I was dreaming. I thought I heard something about somebody's father—could it have been Leo Talbot's?"

"I don't know," said Austin, glad to be able to answer truthfully; "it will be morning soon, and then I can find out anything you wish."

"It is no use"—with a heavy sigh—"they are trying to keep it from me, but it is all beginning to come back now. Leo is dead, and it was I who killed him. Morton and some of the others warned me not to drive home that road with the leader on, but I had a bet on it, and would not listen. Poor Leo! I believe he was in a funk when we started, but he would have gone through fire and water for me, and this is the end—his life taken; and

mine—O God! must I live on with the curse of Cain upon me?”

The voice rose in its agony almost into a cry. The servant sleeping in the next room heard, and came to the door, but Austin dismissed him with a sign, and as Raymond flung himself round with his face to the wall, his cousin laid his cool hand on the aching brow.

“Dear Raymond, our sins are not judged according to their consequences here. God is merciful.”

“His life gone—in a moment—no time for repentance. Surely if judgment is to follow, it ought to come on me.”

“St. Paul took part in the death of Stephen, yet he was forgiven.”

Austin's voice trembled. It was always an effort to him to speak on such a subject as this, and he feared too the immediate consequences of Raymond's knowledge with regard to his friend's fate.

Yet for the moment it seemed as if his words had done good, for the patient gradually sank into an uneasy slumber, which lasted until the daylight had fully dawned.

Two of the young officers now came in, and

one took Austin's place for a little while, while his companion carried the latter off to his rooms, and insisted on his taking a bath and breakfast before returning to his post.

When he went back, he found the Major established in the arm-chair, and the patient lying quiet, but with a look of intense pain on his countenance.

"I am afraid he knows the worst," whispered Major Jerningham. "He has been questioning me, and I could not keep anything back."

"Perhaps the truth is best," said Austin sadly, and somehow the patient caught the words, for he looked up quickly and muttered—

"Yes, the truth, Austin, is always true; but where is it really to be found?"

CHAPTER XVI.

SUNDAY IN BARRACKS.

MANY were the anxious days and nights which followed, before the cautious regimental surgeon pronounced young Anstruther out of danger.

His father had never been able to go to him, and his immediate attendants could hardly regret the circumstance ; for every excitement seemed to throw him back, and a man slowly recovering from a bad fit of the gout could hardly be expected to be a soothing element.

Austin Blake, assisted by Major Jerningham, and occasionally by one or other of the officers (with all of whom the young subaltern was a favourite), continued to nurse him, and as he got better, Mrs. Jerningham was now and then admitted for an hour, while her husband carried off the young Oxonian for needful air and exercise.

"The worst thing against him is his depression," observed the Major one day to his wife. "I can't make out whether it is entirely poor Talbot's death that he is fretting about, or whether there is any other cause. But he is no more like the bright, reckless, dare-devil fellow who joined us a few months ago than I am like that post."

"You might find a stronger simile," said Mrs. Jerningham, smiling, as she surveyed her husband's tall, erect figure, which, as mischievous subalterns were wont to observe, looked as if he had swallowed two or three pokers lengthened into one. "But you are right about that poor boy. I don't understand him; and he is so painfully courteous and polite to me, that I feel my visits are an oppression and no pleasure to him. I wonder if he is less guarded with that good cousin of his. How devoted he has been! One does not often come across such a David and Jonathan friendship in these days."

"And the two are such a contrast, too. I confess I thought young Blake something of a muff on first acquaintance, but I heartily retract that opinion now. He has shown sense,

patience, and powers of endurance, such as I should never have expected from a lad of his age."

"By - the - by, I wonder if there is a little romance behind the scenes. I had a letter from Margaret Hope this morning, anxiously inquiring after our patient, and I gave it to Mr. Blake to read to his cousin, thinking it might rouse and interest him a little. I was not prepared for seeing him colour up and then turn pale as he opened it. I wonder if his heart is given to either of those two pretty half-sisters of Margaret's?"

"I hope not. Lads of his age have no business with such nonsense."

"I hope, whenever it does come to pass, that the two cousins will not clash. This poor fellow would have a bad chance against the superior charms of the other."

Austin Blake was perplexed and troubled at the effect which Miss Hope's letter produced upon his cousin. He had expected so much from it. Unselfish as he was, it had cost him a pang to show to a rival words which so plainly showed the love and anxiety which each member of the Hopedale circle felt for the invalid;

yet Raymond read it through in mournful silence, and then lay still, with no lifting of the heavy cloud which seemed to oppress him.

“You see how constantly you are in their thoughts,” said Austin, feeling as if he *must* say something to break the silence.

“Yes. They do not know how it happened. If they did, they would shun me as a murderer.”

“Raymond, indeed this is morbid! Forgive me, but I *must* speak out, and beg you to shake off this dreadful fancy. You are no more responsible for your friend’s death than you are for attempting, if you choose to put it so, to destroy yourself. Besides, he at least knew and chose to share the risk.”

“Not as I did. He had very little knowledge of horses, and the most blind confidence in me. I never should have attempted it, but for that cursed bet. I knew I was not sufficiently master of myself, though I don’t suppose any one would have said I was drunk. But it’s not that alone—I’ve been going to the bad for weeks, nay, months, and am no more fit for the friendship of such creatures as Phyllis and Cicely”——

"But you may become so once more. God has given you back your life to begin again."

"The past can never be wiped out."

"Make the future so bright that it may be forgotten. Dear Raymond, I would not try to make light of wrong-doing, but this dreary hopelessness is not repentance—it is rather the languor of physical depression."

"The tables are turned indeed for you to talk so to me," said Raymond, with a strangely unmirthful laugh. "What a good fellow you are, Austin—giving up time and everything else to look after such a blackguard as I have been."

"Don't call yourself names, please—I don't like to hear my relations abused," said Austin, smiling. "I want to ask you—it is Sunday morning—could you spare me for a couple of hours, do you think?"

"As long as you like; but you won't be all that time in church. Our worthy old chaplain never preaches for more than twenty minutes at the most."

"But it is the first Sunday in the month, and I don't like to miss the full service, especially now."

"Do you go regularly?"

“When I can.”

There was a silence, and then Raymond said—

“Is it duty or pleasure that makes you go? I mean, is it because you are to be a parson some day, and look on it as part of your *rôle*?”

“No, no,” replied his cousin, colouring painfully, as he struggled with his own dislike to enlarge on such a theme. “It is a duty of course—one which, feeling as I do, it would be wrong to omit; but it is not that only or chiefly—it is the joy and blessing and privilege of my life—my soul would *starve* without it! And now, above all, when I am so happy and so thankful about you, I want to give thanks at our Lord’s own Table—the place where one feels nearest to Him.”

There were tears in the speaker’s eyes, as his fervour carried him beyond his usual sense of painful shyness and self-consciousness. He had borne his testimony bravely, and not, as he afterwards found, without fruit.

When he returned from church, he found his cousin lying very still, and Jackson reported in a whisper that Mr. Anstruther had dozed great part of the morning.

"Well," he said, as his cousin sat down beside him, "I suppose you had the second service pretty much to yourself?"

"No; one or two of the officers and their wives stayed, and a very few of the men. One old sergeant struck me particularly—such a grand, stalwart-looking man, with more medals than I could count; and as I came out he stopped to inquire after you."

"Ah! Sergeant Fisher! He is a fine old fellow. So he goes to the Communion. I never should have thought it."

"Why not? Why will people persist in thinking that religion is a thing for women and children, or poor, weak, unmanly men? Oh! the good that might be done if a few brave, fine fellows—men like you—or Sergeant Fisher, if you like—would not be ashamed to come forward and openly uphold the faith in which they have been baptized! Was not our Lord Himself *man* as well as God? Were not the disciples men—fighting men of fierce, brave spirits, too? Don't you remember how Peter drew his sword in his Master's defence—how James and John wanted to call down fire from Heaven to destroy their oppo-

nents? I am so glad I have been to a military service. It was a fine sight to see all those men come marching in with their heads erect, and their frank, strong faces. I could not help praying that they might be as brave in the cause of Christ as they are in that of their country. I thought of Kingsley's stirring words in the tract that he sent to the army before Sebastopol — 'The Lord Jesus Christ is not only the Prince of Peace; He is the Prince of War too. He is the Lord of Hosts, the God of armies; and whosoever fights in a just war, against tyrants and oppressors, he is fighting on Christ's side, and Christ is fighting on his side. Christ is his Captain and his Leader, and he can be in no better service.' I don't wonder you soldiers are proud of your profession, Raymond! It is the grandest of all—except one."

"Jackson brought me another letter while you were out," said Raymond presently—"from Lady Talbot, poor Leo's mother. I must get you to write a line for me, if you will, but for the life of me I can't tell what to say. Here! read it, and help me if you can."

He handed a black-bordered letter to his

cousin, and Austin read, almost with a feeling of reverence, the bereaved mother's words :—

“ELVASTON HALL, *Sept. 6th.*

“MY DEAR MR. ANSTRUTHER,—I am very thankful to hear that you are recovering from your terrible accident and illness. When you are well enough to travel, will you confer on me a great favour, and come here for a night, or longer if possible? I ask this for Leo's sake, feeling sure that you will not refuse.—Believe me, yours truly,

ALICE TALBOT.”

“What can you do but consent?” said Austin, as he returned the letter. “If your visit can be any comfort to this poor lady, I do not see how you can hesitate.”

“How can it be a comfort to her to see the instrument of her son's death? How can I bear to meet her, knowing his blood to be on my head?”

“Well,” said Austin quietly, “if I were you, I would put myself and my own feelings entirely on one side—I would simply think of doing what Lady Talbot asks. She knows all the circumstances, and yet earnestly wishes to see you.

I think you must just follow the plain course of duty, and leave the rest to come as it may."

And acting on this advice, Raymond dictated a few lines, promising to comply with Lady Talbot's request as soon as he was well enough to travel, and could obtain his leave.

CHAPTER XVII.

LADY TALBOT.

ON a warm autumnal day, some weeks after his accident, Raymond Anstruther found himself at a quiet roadside station on a branch line of the Great Western.

He had been uncertain of the time of his arrival, and had therefore declined Lady Talbot's offer of sending a carriage to meet him.

Elvaston Hall was, he learned from the stationmaster, only half a mile distant, and he resolved to walk, feeling a wish to try the extent of his slowly returning powers of exertion.

It was a soft, grey day, with the delicate lights and shades of early autumn ; pale gleams of sunshine alternated with purple shadows on the distant hills, while a faintly yellowing tinge over the deep green of the trees, and the glowing scarlet of the abundant berries in the hedge-

rows, showed the advance of the year towards shortening days.

For the first few hundred yards, Raymond felt an inward satisfaction in the knowledge that he was getting over the ground with the old swinging stride which had made him the champion racer of his time at Eton. His heart glowed in the consciousness of returning strength and vigour, and Austin would hardly have recognised in the upright athletic form the broken invalid of a few weeks since.

But it did not last. After putting on a spurt in a kind of bravado, his strength began to fail and his feet to flag; he became conscious that the day was close and oppressive, that his head throbbed, and his limbs ached wearily, before he at length turned in at the handsome park gates, and presently stood in front of Elvaston Hall, an imposing, modern pile of building, which somehow looked common-place and almost vulgar to the heir of Holmewood. He was so faint and exhausted, that the servant who opened the door looked doubtfully at him when he tried to explain that he came by appointment.

“Lady Talbot was out, somewhere about the

grounds," the man said, and "Sir Lionel away from home." However, he ushered the visitor into a spacious library, where, mild as it was, a bright fire was burning.

In front of it, on a tiger-skin rug, with one arm embracing a large black Persian cat, sat a little girl curled up. Two or three books were strewn around her, and as Raymond entered she was just beginning with listless fingers to turn over the pieces of a dissected cube-puzzle.

"Do you know where her ladyship is gone, Miss Clara?" the servant asked dubiously. "This gentleman wants to see her."

The little girl rose, shook back her long hair from her face, and came forward to meet the stranger. She was a small, pale, dark-eyed child of some seven or eight years, with a funny, little old-fashioned air of courtesy and precision.

"You will very likely find her by the lake, Jenkins," she said gravely; "or," after a moment's thought, "she may have gone to the churchyard."

Raymond's eye rested on the black frock, and it crossed his mind that his dead friend had spoken more than once of a sister Clara; yet

surely the disparity of years could hardly be so great as this.

He held out his hand to the child, and soon, by the exercise of his winning voice and smile, had drawn her to his side.

“Your name is Clara?” he asked. “I wonder if I have heard of you—are you poor Leo’s little sister?”

The child shook her head.

“Oh, no! Papa and mamma and little brother are in India; they sent me here because I was growing so big. Little Ernie is to come too when he is older.”

Raymond now began to have a hazy remembrance of the fact that his friend’s only sister had, several years ago, married an Indian magistrate, and that this was probably her eldest child, an idea which she confirmed by continuing—

“Mamma says I must try to be a comfort to grandmamma, now poor Uncle Leo is dead; but she is so sad, and I don’t know how to comfort her!”

A sharp pang shot through her listener’s heart, and prevented him from replying. He stroked the child’s unconscious head, and, sur-

prised at the unwonted caress, she looked up at him.

"How tired you seem! Have you walked very far? Lean back in this arm-chair, and I will run and see if grandmamma is coming."

"Never mind me; I am not tired to matter, and I want you to stay and talk a little. Does grandmamma grieve dreadfully about poor Uncle Leo? Has she been ill since he died?"

"Not ill—at least, not quite; but she is always quiet and sad, and goes about as if she hardly knew what was happening. She kisses me sometimes, and says I am like mamma, and she wonders if she shall live to see her again; but she never talks about Uncle Leo."

"And grandpapa—is it the same with him?"

"Oh, no! He talks a great deal more, and sometimes seems angry with some one because Uncle Leo is dead; but grandmamma always begs him to stop when he begins to say such things, and then he looks at her for a moment, and stamps his foot, and goes out of the room."

"And this used to be a bright, happy home," said Raymond, some strange impulse leading him to fill up his own cup of misery to the

uttermost. "You were all happy when Uncle Leo was alive?"

The child drew back and considered, with an odd thoughtful expression on her little grave face.

"Uncle Leo wasn't often with us at home," she said presently. "He never used to play with me ; but I suppose he had no time"——

She broke off, and looked wistfully at her neglected puzzle, then at the face of her new friend. Raymond had a strange sympathy with children, and this little solitary maid appealed to his feelings of compassion. In another moment he was sitting on the tiger-skin beside her, the child laughing for the first time in a child-like, natural way, as he curled up his long limbs and endeavoured not to interfere with the surprised and dignified cat.

"Have you no playfellows, poor little woman?" he asked kindly.

"Only Sweep;" and the child bestowed a loving hug on her furry companion. "He is very good to me, but grandpapa does not like him in the room when he is at home, so he is come in to-day for a treat. Look!

I can't make this picture come right. Will you try?"

Both heads were bent over the puzzle, and so closely absorbed were the two newly made friends, that they did not hear the entrance of a lady, whose soft black draperies swept noiselessly over the thick carpet. Raymond looked up at length, and sprang to his feet, uncertain whether the small, slender figure before him could be that of Lady Talbot.

Gradually, however, he recalled his friend's descriptions of her—"the dear little old mother," "the best little woman in the world;" and wondered at himself for having expected something far more stately and dignified.

A sweet, fair, faded face, bearing some traces of former beauty, eyes that looked heavy with yet unshed tears, and a small form that seemed smothered in its heavy mourning-robcs—such was the woman whose presence he had almost taught himself to dread, and before whom he now stood as a criminal before his judge.

"You have taken us by surprise, Mr. Anstruther," she said, holding out her hand; "but you are none the less welcome. I hope Clara has been taking care of you."

Then seeing how pale and weary he looked, she rang the bell, ordered soup and wine, and with tender care pressed the former upon him. The wine he turned from with a shudder, alleging that since his illness all stimulants were forbidden.

"The Indian mail goes to-day," said Lady Talbot presently. "Clara, darling, I have left room in my letter for you to add a wee line to mamma."

The child gathered up her possessions and slipped quietly away, and her grandmother looked after her fondly for a moment.

"She is very like her mother. You have heard of her?—my dear Clara, who married and settled at Benares nine years ago. The climate was injuring this little one, and they sent her home to me. I suppose the boy will soon come now also."

"And is it—can they be any comfort to you?" burst out Raymond passionately.

She looked at him with her strange, quiet smile. "I don't know; comfort to oneself is not the thing that matters most. I wonder if I have been selfish to bring you here," she added, noticing the working of her visitor's

face, and the whiteness of his lips and brow. "I almost doubted whether it were right to ask it, and yet I knew you would do much to oblige Leo's mother—for his sake."

"He was the dearest friend I ever had. Would to God my life could have been given in exchange for his," said Raymond, moving restlessly in his agitation.

"I know, poor boy!" and she laid her white hand on his aching brow; "but it was God's will that he should be taken and you left. Your life is given you back from the gates of death. Will you not regard it as a second time God's gift, and try to live for His service?"

The sweet low tones found their way to his heart as no words of exhortation, no friendly counsel, had ever done yet.

For the first time a sense of his own motherless boyhood came before him, and he sank on his knees beside the woman whose son's death lay at his door, and hid his face in the black folds of her dress.

"Lady Talbot, do not speak so kindly to me—I cannot bear it. Remember who I am—the man whose drunken recklessness killed



LADY TALBOT AND RAYMOND.

your son, but for whom he would now be alive and well. How can you bear to let me approach you?"

She laid her hand on the bowed head and murmured—"‘There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.’ He sees and knows your repentance, and it was His will that you should be the unconscious instrument of my boy’s death. Look back no more, but forward! You are a brave man, and have a man’s duty to do in this struggling world. Often it is harder, I think," she added, with a sad wistfulness that went to his heart as he looked at the frail, careworn woman—"much harder to live than to die."

And as they talked on, some of the inner life of that stately home became more and more revealed to Raymond’s mind—the gentle mistress striving to do her duty in a stern, ungenial atmosphere, never complaining, yet often faint at heart, and hopeless of peace of mind.

Raymond had long ago guessed that his friend’s agnosticism was increased and fostered by the rigid and narrow creed which his father held, and by transgressing any rule of which,

Sir Lionel would have considered his soul imperilled.

"I think," said poor Lady Talbot, "that if his sister could have remained at home, it might have been different with my poor Leo. He used to go to church sometimes when she asked him; but latterly—ah! I wonder if the fault lay in my early teaching! Surely I ought to have been able to win him to better things. He was always dear and good to me."

"He loved you devotedly," said Raymond warmly. "I have often heard him say that if any one in this world were good, and pure-minded, and true"—he broke off, remembering what the sequel had been—"and a martyr to the narrowest and hardest rule of tyranny ever exercised in a free country."

"Yes; he was always a good son to me," was the tender reply. "And I think—I do feel that God will not let that be forgotten. He had many faults—I know, and dare not hide this from myself—but God's mercy is not limited like ours. Our Lord died for sinners."

Then after a pause—"But let us talk of you, and what is to be done with this life that has

been given you back—such a priceless gift! And even in the little I know of you, I can partly guess the reason. Men such as you are born to be leaders in the great race of life. You are one to influence others rather than to be influenced, and you must see that it is for good and not evil.”

“But I cannot see how,” said Raymond wearily. “My profession alone”——

“Your profession! The noblest of all secular callings. The profession that calls forth a man’s grandest qualities—in which those who have the gift of leadership are especially fitted to shine. Can you not show those under your command, that a brave man and a Christian can be one and the same? Can you not teach them that none fear death so little, as those who are living in the Hope of Eternal Life? Read the story of one who, scarcely older than yourself, lived as a Christian hero, and died bravely in his country’s service with the army before Sebastopol. Read about General Havelock, the gallant general under whom you may shortly be called to serve—a good man if there ever lived one on earth, and one of our bravest commanders! Oh! there have been many such,

thank God, from the days of Joshua till now—men who, while serving their country, gave their *best* service to their country's God. And if it should ever be your privilege to save life rather than to slay—the most glorious work of all that comes within a soldier's province"—

"Ah!" cried Raymond, catching her enthusiasm, "*that* would be worth living for. Should the chance ever befall me, I shall think of you, and *then* at last perhaps believe myself forgiven."

"Believe it without conditions," she said, with her sweet, sad smile. "You were Leo's friend—if he could speak from the grave, he would bid me bear you no grudge."

CHAPTER XVIII.

FATHER AND SON.

LATE on the following evening a carriage was driving up the avenue of Holmewood, and Colonel Anstruther, now convalescent, but unable to stand or walk without a stick, hobbled out into the portico to meet his son.

“Welcome, my boy, at last,” he said, in tones harsh with repressed emotion. “It seems many a long day since I heard the sound of your voice.”

“Dear old dad!” and as Raymond sprang to the ground, a strong hand-clasp was exchanged. “Why, your walking is not much to boast of yet. I believe, after all, you have been the worst invalid of the two.”

“Cross and gouty—not much else amiss. The doctor says if I am careful to diet myself, I shall get right in time—not that life is much worth having on his terms.”

"Life is worth most prices we can pay for it," said Raymond lightly. "Let me look at you, father; you are thin enough, and, I declare, ever so much greyer than when I went away. Surely the gout can't have been the only ailment?"

"Well, I suppose I fretted a bit about you—you careless, good-for-nothing boy. Where's Austin, by the way? The lad was good to me in his way—very good; but it wasn't exactly my way, nor yours."

"No; the more's the pity," said Raymond gravely. "Father, words cannot say what Austin was to me when I was at my worst. Such untiring patience and devotion—aye, and sense too! Both the doctor and old Jerningham say I could never have pulled through but for his nursing."

"Ah! you have had a hard tussle, my poor boy," and the Colonel gazed anxiously at the features sharpened by illness and pain. "But young bones mend apace; you'll be all right now you have turned the corner. How long have you got leave for?"

"Can't quite say; it depends on these Indian orders. It may be only a week, or

perhaps more. Tell me something of Hopedale, father."

"They sent over to ask after you every day when you were at your worst. Austin tells me there is trouble there too; but I don't know how much to believe."

"For Heaven's sake, what is wrong?"

Raymond's heart seemed to stand still as he waited for the answer. His father watched him with a smile of cynical amusement.

"Why, how nervous you are, boy! Your colour comes and goes like a lady's. Not quite fit for an Indian campaign yet, eh? Well, you needn't stamp or swear (if you didn't, you wanted to, which is the same thing); 'tis nothing very bad—only Phyllis is a little ailing, and her sister as usual a martyr to her own fidgets."

"Phyllis ailing!" Raymond moved restlessly in his chair, unable to evade the scrutiny of his father's cold, satirical eye. "She used to be as bright and gay as a bird—one could not fancy her anything else. What can be the matter?"

"Very likely nothing; but twaddling neighbours have got hold of Margaret, and persuaded

her to listen to their croaking. And the doctors, who of course are bound to say something, fancy the child's lungs are not all they should be, and they want to pack her off to Mentone, but she herself objects."

Raymond drew a long breath.

"I shall go over to-morrow," he said. "Father, if I live, and—and if it be God's will, Phyllis Hope will be my wife."

The Colonel gave a grim chuckle of amusement not unmingled with satisfaction.

"Do you think I did not know that?" he said presently. "I have watched it coming for long enough, and held my tongue, like a wise man, wondering how long it would be before you came to the scratch."

"You have? Do you think that any one else guesses?"

"Austin may—I can't be sure. Poor lad! I'm not sure if he had not some wild dream in the same direction himself. Where is he now?"

"Gone back to his reading, and at it hard to make up for lost time. Do you think that he too was fascinated?"

"I don't think about it—or did not till you

mentioned his name. But I have thought of *you*, my boy, many a time, night and day, when the pain would not let me rest. I don't see how you could do better—a sweet, lady-like, pretty girl as ever lived; and old Hope's money-bags are not to be despised. Each of those younger girls must have £25,000 at least.”

“But,” said Raymond, with a gesture of impatience, “how can I tell that I have any chance? Phyllis might marry a duke if she pleased; and it is not that alone—pure, sweet, little angel as she is, ignorant of the very existence of half the wrong-doing on earth—how can I even hope that I shall be allowed to approach her?”

“Take the matter into your own hands. Two years more, and her sister's guardianship ceases.”

“I shall do nothing without her consent,” said Raymond steadily. “To begin with, I should hold it almost a profanation for such a wild scamp as I have been to bind that sweet girl to a long, indefinite engagement, such as it must be with this Indian business in prospect.”

“Then you may as well make up your mind

to defeat and disappointment—nay, to hearing that some pious fortune-hunter has stepped in and carried off the prize, while you are haggling over your delicate questions of honour. I know Margaret Hope better than you—to my cost. Where her conscience is at stake, she would not hesitate to sacrifice herself, aye, and her nearest and dearest, without compunction or mercy.”

“And she would be right,” was the brief, sad reply. But after this the Colonel could not extract another word from his son upon the subject nearest to both their hearts.

The next day Raymond rode to Hopedale. He was shown into the library, where the two girls were eagerly poring over a table covered with plans and sketches.

“Raymond !” and Cicely sprang forward with outstretched hands ; but Phyllis’ colour changed from carmine to deadly white, while she grasped the table to keep herself from falling. He was by her side in a moment.

“She is ill—she will faint,” he said hastily, supporting her back into a chair. “What is it, Cicely ? Is she very ill ?”

There was such agony in the tone that Phyllis,

now recovering from her momentary giddiness, looked up into his face and smiled.

“It is nothing but being startled. It is so foolish, but since I have been ill, everything sudden seems to take my breath away. It will all go off as I get stronger. Tell us about yourself. Are you quite — quite well again?”

“Ever so much better than I deserve to be. My head has not quite recovered from its crack yet, but that must be a work of time.”

“Mr. Blake used to write to sister about you,” said Cicely. “And you know he came back to Holmewood for a few days when you were getting better. He told us what terrible danger you had been in.”

“Yes; it was a near shave. I don’t think at first they expected me to pull through. I never should have, but for Austin’s nursing. You cannot guess what a good fellow that is. No one could, who had not seen him in a sick-room.”

Raymond spoke with fervour, straight from his heart, and the two girls understood him. He was feeling as if neither he nor they

had ever done full justice to his shy, reticent cousin.

"But what have you here?" said Raymond presently, turning to the drawings spread out upon the table. "Plans for the church! Have you come to that already?"

"There are not two years to wait now before, please God, it can be begun."

"But have you seriously counted the cost? It seems a tremendous undertaking."

"I shall have enough," said Phyllis quietly. "Sister and Cicely say they *must* help; but I have thought it all over, and I could do it myself. Still it will be sweeter to work together."

"But Phyllis will give the lion's share," put in Cicely. "She insists on this. Ours will be only a little extra help. See, Raymond, this is the plan—the church here at the corner of the road, and the school close by, and the little drive up to the parsonage dividing the playground from the churchyard. And the parsonage itself is to stand on that little knoll, high up among the elm-trees. Is it not pretty?"

"Wonderfully perfect. How you must have thought and planned it all out!"

“Oh, Phyllis has had it in her mind for years ! I don’t think she ever forgets the church, even in her dreams.”

“And do the village people know of her intentions ?”

“Some of them—and they seem so happy about it. As they say, poor Walton Sudbury is but a heathenish place now. But tell us more about yourself, Raymond. What a long time it is since we had a comfortable chat.”

“And I cannot stay for one now, Cicely, I fear. My father is alone, and ailing still—I promised not to be long away. By-the-by, it would astonish you to hear him talk of Austin. He used to hold him so cheap, and now he cannot say enough in his praise.”

“Mr. Blake has come out wonderfully,” said Phyllis. “He used to be so dreadfully diffident and retiring, as if he shrank from the sound of his own voice, and now—I don’t mean that he lays down the law, or is the least self-assuming—but he seems quite fearless in asserting what he thinks to be right, and holding by his argument in spite of everything. Sister heard an old man say the other day ‘that he would make a grand parson one

of these days.' But I wonder where sister can be."

"I'll go and look for her," cried Cicely, starting up, and the next moment, Raymond found himself alone with the girl whom he loved far better than his own life. For an instant his resolution trembled in the balance. Should he tell her everything, and give himself the comfort of knowing that she shared the dearest secret of his heart?

But one glance at the sweet face, untroubled as yet in its childish simplicity, decided him. It would not be fair to let the decision rest with her.

"Phyllis," he said presently, and she started at the sadness of his tone, "do you remember persuading me to come to the confirmation two years ago?"

"Yes," she said quickly, and looking for more to follow.

"I have been ready sometimes to wish that I had stayed away. Vows are better unmade than broken."

"Oh! do not say that," she said eagerly. "We should all stand still for ever if we felt that. We break them, I know, every day, every

hour! You can't think how often I despise myself for being so weak—it is like being down in a marsh and seeing the sunny hills we are trying to reach far, far away. The mud clogs our feet and drags us back, but if we are pushing on, ever so little, the ground will grow firmer near the bank, and a strong Hand will be held out to pull us up. If we can once take hold of that, it will pull us up—oh! so safely! And our feet will stand on the sunny hillsides at last, and the clouds will be all gold and crimson and gloriously beautiful in the setting sun”——

She broke off with a light that was scarcely of this world shining in her beautiful eyes, and Raymond, looking at her, felt as if an angel were beckoning him forward on his earthly career.

Cicely now returned, accompanied by her elder sister, whose quick questioning glance, from Phyllis to himself, did not escape Raymond's observation.

“And so you are all going abroad this winter,” he said presently, as rather a constrained silence seemed falling upon them.

“I think so,” Margaret replied. “This child,” with a fond touch on Phyllis' curls,

"has been rather naughty and troublesome in getting bad colds, and we think we may as well avoid the fogs and give ourselves a little holiday in December and January."

"Make it a little farther," said Raymond, "and come out to India. I believe the climate would do her no end of good."

He broke off in some confusion, as the sound of his own words reached his mind's ear. The next moment he had started up, and muttering something about his father, hurried away in quest of his horse.

Three days later he was again at Hopedale, but this time the girls were out driving, and Margaret received him alone.

"It is as well," he said, in the straightforward way which recalled the boyish days, when he used to come to her, almost his only friend, with eager confidential confessions. "Miss Hope, I hardly think I need tell you what I want to say. It is no new thing—it has been growing for years. Ever since we were children together, Phyllis has been my better angel—the softening, purifying influence of my rough life. And now I am old enough to act a man's part—there are no worldly obstacles—my father guessed my

secret long ago, and is ready to welcome her with his whole heart—will you not bid me God speed also?”

Poor Margaret! Her heart ached as she looked up at the handsome young face, dear to her alike for its own sake and the remembrance of auld lang syne, and it was some moments before she could recall the prudent resolutions which she had long been struggling to form.

“Raymond,” she said gently at last, “I wish—I wish with all my heart that you had spared me this.”

And then her voice faltered, and the tears would have their way. He waited patiently for a moment, and then came forward and took her hand.

“Is it that I am too unworthy? I know it only too well; but with such an incentive, I would try—oh! harder than any words can express—to make myself more fit for her.”

“It is not that—not that alone, at least” (recalling her prudent resolutions). “But I could not let her go to India—my darling, my ewe-lamb, with her delicate frame and highly-wrought temperament—and the long waiting

and anxiety would be worse than all. She is not fit to battle with suspense; and—forgive me, Raymond. I believe—I trust you *now* implicitly, but the temptations surrounding your daily life are many, and stronger perhaps than you are aware of. Oh! be generous—leave her free, undisturbed in her childish peace and simplicity, until ”——

“Until I return—I may speak then?” he cried, in his eagerness seizing her hand in his strong grasp. “Is that what you meant? Oh, Miss Hope, God bless you! You have indeed given me comfort.”

“I have loved you all your life as a sort of nephew or younger brother,” said Margaret, concealing her emotion under an assumed lightness of tone, “and it would be strange if I could not sympathise in your devotion to one of the sweetest of God’s creatures. But, Raymond, I can give no promise, nor shall I fetter her with any hint that you have spoken to me. You must both be free, and should time and distance change your wishes ”——

He made an indignant movement, and she half smiled as she owned to herself that to one

who had loved Phyllis Hope, the temptations to fickleness would be few.

“But you are right—I own it,” he said, with a certain dignified humility in his saddened look and tone. “One whose follies have wrought such fatal evil as mine has no right to bind so pure a creature down to share the darker hours of his life. It may be that the opportunity to atone in some measure may be granted even on earth. If not, if repentance be accepted”——

“It will be—it is!” cried Margaret, her heart aching for the young fellow in his honest, manly sorrow and submission. “We are not expected to *earn* our pardon—only to believe, and trust our Saviour for the rest. God bless you, Raymond! When we meet again, it may be you will think me less cruel. Now go, before the girls return; neither of us are fit to meet them as usual just now.”

“Baffled once more by Margaret Hope!” was the Colonel’s grim comment, as his son briefly related the substance of the foregoing conversation, but he forbore to use further argument in the matter.

On the following morning all was hurry and

confusion at Holmewood. A telegram had summoned Raymond to join his regiment, which was to sail at once for India ; and a brief message of farewell was all that he was able to leave for the sisters at Hopedale.

CHAPTER XIX.

TERRIBLE TIDINGS

THE winter and early spring passed away, and sorely against the grain the ladies of Hope-dale accepted their sentence of banishment to a warmer foreign clime.

But as the days lengthened, and Margaret and Cicely noticed with joy the hue of returning health in their darling's cheek, and the gradually increasing vigour of her whole appearance, all agreed that the time had come for a return to the much-loved home; and one fine warm day towards the middle of May, found them once more on their native shores.

Not an hour could the younger girls linger in London, though the season was at its height, and to less devoted country-lovers the temptations might have been many.

"Home, home," was their cry, and Margaret yielded, not perhaps unwillingly.

She had seen no reason to regret her line of conduct in regard to Raymond Anstruther. Phyllis was, to all appearance, the same simple, unspoiled child as ever; and if now and then a graver shadow rested on her sweet face, her anxious guardian attributed it to the fears for her health, which they had been unable wholly to keep from her.

“Let her life be happy—even—as much as possible free from pain or care,” the doctor had said, “and she may be spared for many years. Anxiety—wear and tear of any kind—above all, any sudden shock, may be fatal. She has no stamina to fall back upon, and her gay spirits are accompanied by nerves far too finely strung for hard use.”

And day by day, hour by hour, bearing this in mind, the anxious elder sister strove to put aside every thorn or briar from her darling's path. But God's ways are not as ours, and it was ordained that all this loving care should prove vain.

They had been at home some weeks, and the delicate colouring of spring had given place to the glory of early summer. The lanes were fragrant with honeysuckle, and wild roses

were spreading their dainty shell-like petals in every hedgerow, as one evening the three sisters took their evening drive towards Walton Sudbury.

It was Phyllis' favourite spot: her plans were gradually assuming hopeful and definite shape; in another year she would be of age and the work begun.

They had been talking of Raymond, and wondering when his next letter could be expected. The last had been a happy one, although written while he was still weak from a severe attack of fever.

He had been sent to the hills on sick-leave, and there, to his inexpressible joy, had fallen in with Mrs. Lindsay, the sister of his friend Leo Talbot, and wife of one of the Commissioners in Benares.

She and her little boy had been sent to the hills in search of health, but she was anxious to rejoin her husband, feeling somewhat disquieted by rumours of disaffection among the Sepoys.

Raymond, whose leave had not expired, gladly offered to act as her escort, and when he wrote, they had been on the eve of departure.

"The child is a jolly little chap," he wrote to Miss Hope, "extremely like poor Leo, and much more robust than his sister. He has taken a prodigious fancy to me, and trots after me like one of the poor old dogs at home. Heigh-ho! shouldn't I like a walk with them, or a gallop on Black Douglas, and a sight of Hopedale and all it contains once more!"

The sisters were talking of this letter, and fondly counting the months that must elapse before there could be any hope of this wish being fulfilled, when, as they neared the hamlet, they noticed an unusual stir and excitement amongst its inhabitants.

"Some accident, I am afraid," said Phyllis, turning pale; "please let George go and ask what is the matter."

"There is John Furse," said Cicely; "he looks as if he had heard some strange news."

She beckoned the man to come to speak to them, and he obeyed, though, as Margaret noticed, with some hesitation.

"Sad work at Holmewood," he said, looking down, and fingering his cap. "'Twill go near to kill the Colonel, unless I'm mistaken."

"Holmewood!" Margaret felt stunned. Had

some harm befallen the bright lad so lately in their thoughts? She dared not put the next question—it was Phyllis who, white as death, yet with a strange tone and gesture of command, leant forward and bade the man speak out.

“Is it from India? Please tell us quickly.”

“’Tis from India, Miss Phyllis, and many an aching heart there will be in our own country this day. They say that a great rebellion has broken out among the black savages, and they are butchering our men—aye, and women and children too—by hundreds.”

“Hush!” cried Margaret, throwing her arm round Phyllis’ shrinking form; “it may be exaggeration—first reports often are.”

“Yes, but Holmewood?” and again Phyllis shook herself free, sat upright, and in her eagerness caught the man by the sleeve; “what news has come there?”

“Bad enough, Miss Phyllis,” was the sorrowful answer. “He’s gone—that brave, kind-hearted young gentleman. I little thought, when he was the saving of me about the drink those years ago, that he was to go so soon. The telegram only said, ‘Lieutenant

Anstruther, killed in saving life.' Those were the words exact, for it was the coachman from the manor as told me. I met him riding off to fetch the doctor, and to send off a telegram for Mr. Austin. The poor Colonel's like one struck for death, they say, since the news came."

No one spoke, but in the strange stillness the three sisters could hear each other's breathing. Could the sun be shining still—was all the quiet beauty of that English country scene unchanged, while such deeds were being enacted in a land professedly under English rule?

"Killed—in saving life!" It was Phyllis at last who repeated the words, almost in the dull voice of a sleep-walker; and with great alarm her sisters noticed the glassy stare of her eyes—the strange, unnatural calm that seemed to possess her.

"Killed—in saving life!" Again and again she repeated the words, still in that same dreamy manner. "He always wished for that—the martyr's crown." Then, with a sudden change and sinking together of her whole frame, she clung to Margaret, and hid her face, shuddering.

“Let us go home,” she cried ; and the horse’s head was turned, and in silence they drove back to their own door.

A messenger was speedily despatched to Holmewood, and returned with the account that Colonel Anstruther was very ill. His sister and Mr. Austin Blake had been sent for, and the latter was expected in a few hours.

It was late before Margaret Hope lay down to rest that night, and even then she left her door ajar, and listened, in great anxiety, for any sound from the room which her sisters always shared together.

Daylight was breaking before her eyes began to close, and it was just in the faint blue dawn that, as an uneasy slumber at last fell upon her, she was roused by a gentle touch, and looked up to see Cicely, white and trembling, standing by her bedside.

“Oh, sister !” she exclaimed, almost sobbing in her extreme terror, “I wish you would come to Phyllis. I am afraid she is very ill—in a brain fever perhaps. She was awake a long time, and quiet, though she could not rest, but half an hour ago she seemed to fall asleep, and now

she is talking so terribly. I think this news about Raymond has killed her."

"Cicely!"—the elder sister had sprung out of bed at the first word, and stood gazing at the girl in horror-stricken perplexity—"had he ever said more to her than I knew? Had she reason to grieve specially—more than yourself?"

"No; and that is partly what is breaking her heart," sobbed Cicely. "She keeps on repeating, 'No right—no right, more than others—I must not let any one know—only his little playfellow'—till it breaks my heart to hear her. Oh, sister, I do think if he had spoken before he went—if she knew that he loved her, and that she had the right to grieve—not to keep it all crushed down—I think she could have borne it better."

"God forgive me! I meant it for the best;" and leaving Cicely strangely mystified by her words and manner, the elder sister made her way to the room still fondly known as "the nursery." There, in her little white bed, with the faint morning rays falling on her bright tumbled curls, lay Phyllis, tossing in a feverish and unrestful doze, starting up every moment

as if in the terrors of nightmare, and murmuring again and again the words Cicely had repeated.

Margaret could no longer hesitate; she bent over the child, kissing the flushed face, and trying to smooth the disordered pillow.

“Phyllis darling, I cannot bear to see you thus—such sleep can do you no good. Will you listen to a little talk if I sit by you?”

The girl looked up, and tried to give her usual grateful smile, but there was inexpressible weariness in the glance.

“You must not mind me,” she said, trying in vain to keep all sharpness from her weak tones. “I am weak and foolish. It is too bad to bring more trouble upon you and Cicely.”

“Phyllis, my child”—and the elder woman in heartfelt pity and distress knelt by the bedside and laid her cheek against the half-averted face—“would it comfort you—could you bear this sorrow better—if you knew that of all others you have the right to feel it most? that before he went away, dear Raymond spoke of the love which was the guiding-star of his life—beckoning him forward to highest and noblest aims?”

“Sister!” How the face seemed illumined in the pale daylight! How the blue eyes flashed with a joy that seemed hardly of earth. “How can you know? What right have I to think this?”

“The best—the best, my child. I have it from his own lips. Forgive your old sister if you can, Phyllis. I meant to act for the best, and to spare you the pain and suspense, for which you seemed so unfitted, my darling. And so I begged him to keep silence until his return; and he, always generous, listened to my entreaty, and accepted the delay as a term of probation to himself.”

“Always generous!” The girl repeated the words dreamily, while her eyes were fixed as on some far-away vision. “And he loved me—me, little Phyllis, to whom he was always so good in the old childish days! And I have the right—there is no shame in grieving for him now! And it is not grief—his wish was fulfilled—God heard his prayer and let him make the atonement for which he longed; and I—we shall meet soon, and then pain and partings will be forgotten.”

She clasped her hands and looked upward,

and Margaret, watching the sweet rapt face, thought, with a sudden pang, of the doctor's prophetic words. Yes! she was passing from them—yet who could be cruel enough to wish to chain such a spirit down to earth?

CHAPTER XX.

"KILLED—IN SAVING LIFE."

MANY a long weary week passed before any details of the tragedy which had robbed them of their best and brightest reached the inmates of Holmewood and Hopedale.

The first telegram, in its bare, cruel distinctness, had been sent by Raymond's colonel as soon as the death of the young subaltern became known in his regiment, but it was not until the autumn was far advanced, and Lucknow in the hands of our victorious troops, that all the circumstances were explained, in a letter from Mrs. Lindsay to her mother, Lady Talbot.

"You must bless his memory, dear mother, for but for him I should be widowed, and our little ones fatherless."

After entering into some details respecting her journey back from the hills, in which Raymond (then on sick-leave after an attack of fever) had acted as her escort, Mrs. Lindsay

explained that on arriving at Benares, she had found things in much confusion there, a panic prevailing, and her husband only regretting that he had not been able to hinder her return.

With some difficulty she prevailed on him to remove, as many were doing, to Lucknow, and for that place they finally set out. Raymond wished to rejoin his regiment, but his leave had not expired, and Mr. Lindsay earnestly entreated him to remain, as an additional protector to his wife and child, until they were placed in safety. So, in company with many other refugees, they had set out, accomplishing the first part of their journey in safety. They had almost begun to hope that the bitterness of death was past, when they were joined, sorely against their will, by a band of Sepoys, who had formerly served under an officer, who, with his family, travelled amongst their party. These wretches, after swearing the most solemn oaths to act as their protectors, had suddenly and treacherously attacked the refugees by night. There was, however, among them one, to whose sick child Mrs. Lindsay had once had an opportunity of showing kindness, and in return, this man did his utmost to protect her and her little

one in the general massacre which ensued. "He promised to convey me to a place of safety," wrote Mrs. Lindsay, "and Ernest, feeling it the only hope, urged me to trust to Syed Hoossain's promises, and to save myself for our children's sake. I refused to go, feeling that it were far better to die together; and poor little Ernie clung to Mr. Anstruther, knowing, baby as he was, that some terrible danger threatened us. I shall never forget the brave young face, as I saw it last, so calm in the hour of peril; it made me think of St. Stephen. He unclasped the child's arms and gave him to me, with some caressing word, and then he pressed my hand for an instant.

" 'I will save your husband, if God wills it,' he said, and the next moment he had sprung to Ernest's side. I saw one of the monsters level his musket—I saw Raymond fling himself in front of my husband, with his revolver in his hand—I saw them both fall, almost at the same moment; and then I think I must have lost consciousness, and have allowed Syed Hoossain to drag me away, for I remember no more until I found myself cowering in the jungle, with Syed Hoossain kneeling beside me, and poor

little Ernie clinging to my dress and sobbing piteously. Then for a while I think I went mad, and threatened to go back and implore the murderers to kill me too. What was life worth having, with my husband dead? Poor Syed Hoossain at last prevailed upon me to stay quietly where I was, and allow him to creep back and reconnoitre the spot where our terrible disaster had taken place. I don't think I had any fear of treachery, or, if I had, that it affected me more than with a sort of hope that I might soon follow the one I loved best to another world. Even when Ernie cried in childish terror about the wild beasts who might devour us, it did not seem to cause me any alarm. I do not know how long I sate there—it may have been some hours, for the sun had risen, and Ernie, worn out with terror and fatigue, had fallen asleep on my knee. I had no fixed ideas as to my next movement—no plans for flight; and if I tried to pray, the words came confusedly, and without meaning. Suddenly I heard a crackling of branches and soft footsteps coming towards me; then the instinct of terror woke up once more, and I clasped Ernie closer, feeling that I would sell my life

dearly for his sake. I looked up, scarce daring to believe my eyes, for there stood Ernest himself, pale and spent from loss of blood, and scarcely able to walk, even with the aid of Syed Hoossain's arm, but alive, and with his own smile of greeting for our child as it sprung towards him ! He could scarcely speak, and it was Syed Hoossain who at first explained to me how he had found him—the only living creature among that hapless community—and, mercifully for us, abandoned as dead, like the rest, by the murderers. Raymond Anstruther had thrown himself in front of him as the shot was fired—the bullet had passed through his body, and only grazed my husband's side. A blow on the head from behind had stunned Ernest at the same moment, and he and his preserver fell, as I had seen them, together. But even in death dear Raymond was enabled to fulfil his promise to me, for as he lay across my husband's insensible form, his body shielded Ernest's from blows or mutilation. Ernest thinks that for some time he remained unconscious, for daylight was glimmering as he at length awoke to a sense of pain and suffocation, and at last to the horrible perception that he

was left alone, with the too sadly disfigured corpses of the friends with whom he had been journeying. The growing light enabled him to ascertain that not one except himself had survived that terrible night's work—men, women, and children had shared the same fate. He managed to free himself from poor Raymond's weight, and felt his heart and pulse, in the faint hope that some sign of life yet lingered, but in vain—the brave young spirit had fled, and he lay calm as if in sleep, though covered with frightful wounds. Ernest believes and hopes that the first shot really produced unconsciousness. He then dragged himself to the places where lay the bodies of some of our other friends, vainly hoping that some might, like himself, have survived; and it was just as this sad search was completed, and he was beginning to be a prey to the most horrible anxieties respecting my fate and Ernie's, that he heard cautious steps approaching, and discovered it to be Syed Hoossain with the joyful tidings of my safety."

Mrs. Lindsay then went on to describe the horrors of the life they were for many days compelled to lead, hiding in the jungle by day,

and travelling a few miles as best they could under the shadow of night—obliged to trust entirely to the fidelity of their protector, who mercifully proved himself nobly deserving of their confidence.

Weary, spent, and well-nigh starving, yet joyful in bearing their sufferings together, they at length reached Fyzabad in safety ; and from thence were, with other refugees, escorted by some of Sir Henry Lawrence's volunteer cavalry into Lucknow.

Here they remained to share the months of anxiety and suspense so bravely endured by the noble old leader and his beleaguered garrison. Of his soldier-like death, and the dark shadow it cast on all who had the honour and privilege of fighting under his command, and following that bright example of courage and endurance—of the fearful tidings from Cawnpore and other places—of Havelock's gallant entry on the 26th of September, and the final storming of the city nearly two months later by Sir Colin Campbell, Mrs. Lindsay wrote at some length. Her husband's Scotch blood had fired with enthusiasm as the bagpipes and the steady tramp of their deliverers sounded ever nearer :—

"Dinna ye hear it? Dinna ye hear it?
High o'er the battle's din, dinna ye hear it?
High o'er the battle's din, hail it and cheer it!
'Tis the Highlander's slogan—dinna ye hear it?"

Yet even in the hour of victory—even with the knowledge that the months of agony were over, and life opening before her with renewed hope once more—Mrs. Lindsay found herself dwelling, with a tender reverence that could hardly be called sorrow, on the memory of the brave lad who had given his life to save her husband, and in so doing had enabled her to feel thankfulness, rather than regret, for her own preservation.

CHAPTER XXI.

RAYMOND'S FATHER.

FOR many weeks after the arrival of the first terrible tidings of his bereavement, Colonel Anstruther's health had been such as to cause great anxiety to his few remaining relatives. Austin Blake, now a deacon in holy orders, was with him as often as he could be spared from his first curacy, and Mrs. Blake offered to give up her home and devote herself to nursing her brother.

This offer, as Austin half expected, was peremptorily declined—the brother and sister had so little in common, that they continually jarred upon one another, and it was a relief to all when, the doctor having given a verdict of “no present danger,” Mrs. Blake departed, glad to escape, though reluctant to abandon her cherished project of bringing her brother to a more awakened spiritual condition.

“And I must go back to my work next week,” sighed Austin, as he lingered one summer evening in the garden at Hopedale. “I can do little or nothing for the poor old man. Yes, he looks quite old since his illness and sorrow; but still I cannot bear the thought of leaving him to brood in that dreary solitude. Every tree and stone in the place is connected in his mind with Raymond. He idolised him—and who can wonder? and now in his old age his staff is broken, his light gone out, and he has nothing—no hope here or hereafter to cheer him.”

“Will he let you read to him at all?”

“He just tolerates it—out of courtesy to the newly-fledged parson, I know! But all the time I feel so nervous that I can hardly pronounce the words, and despise myself for being so. What would Raymond have thought of a cousin who could be a coward?”

“Raymond always said you had more moral courage than any one,” interposed Cicely eagerly, while Phyllis drew nearer, and laid her hand—how white and thin it looked now!—upon Austin’s arm. “Raymond liked you to be with his father,” she said softly; and then Margaret asked a few more questions, and it transpired

that the Colonel had, ever since the first shock, remained in that stunned, sullen state of melancholy.

“I wish he had any friends who could help to rouse him a little,” said Austin sadly; “he does not like the Truemans, and none of the other neighbours seem to care to call. Holmewood has so long been a tabooed house, that no one knows how to begin, or even whether a visit would be acceptable. And yet it is enough to break one’s heart to see him sitting there alone, day after day, brooding over his loss, and to feel how utterly removed he is from all reach of the only real Comfort!”

The next day, Austin appeared at Hopedale once more. “I do not know what you will say when you hear my mission,” he began nervously, as Margaret greeted him. “And yet how could I refuse to do my poor uncle’s bidding? Of course you will refuse; but he insisted on my coming here to ask whether Phyllis will go and see him!”

“Phyllis!” Margaret stood appalled at the thought of sending her cherished ewe-lamb into the precincts of the lion’s den. She did not know that the girl, startled by her own name,

had unconsciously drawn within hearing of the next words.

"He is always asking—craving to see her. Of course it is a sick man's fancy, but it almost seems like an inspiration, as if some message from Raymond had directed his thoughts towards the one the dear fellow regarded as his own better angel."

"Not that!" It was Phyllis' own soft voice that breathed the words, and a moment later she went on calmly—"I will go to your poor uncle, if he wishes it, and sister does not think it wrong."

A remonstrance was on Margaret's lips, but it died away, as she remembered that but for her interference Phyllis would ere now have possessed almost a daughter's right to tend and comfort Raymond's father. Nor was it easy, gentle as Phyllis always was, to act in direct opposition to that calm, steadfast will.

And so, with many heart-throbbings, Margaret Hope saw her young sister enter the house which should once have been her own—bound on her mission of comfort to the man who, many years before, had blighted her own young life.

Sad indeed was the sight within ; the great lofty oak-panelled room, with its stately array of family portraits, and beneath one—the latest—sat the lonely master of the house, an old man before his time, bowed and grey, with his gaze ever piteously, despairingly, turned on the pictured face before him.

It was Raymond in his uniform—young, joyous, full of hope and purpose in his life, as when she had seen him last ; and for a moment the shock to Phyllis was almost too great. She staggered and would have fallen, but for Austin's supporting arm ; the next moment she had rallied her powers, and had only eyes and thoughts for the sad bent figure in the arm-chair.

Austin drew her forward, and touched his uncle's sleeve. The Colonel looked up, and old habits of courtesy revived with his start of surprise and recognition.

"Miss Hope !" he exclaimed, "this is indeed an unexpected honour. I could not have ventured to ask what my nephew appears to have taken on himself"—

"Not Miss Hope—little Phyllis," the girl whispered softly ; and again her eyes sought

the portrait, as if counsel or inspiration might be found there. Her heart was beating fast; she had promised her sister not to remain long, and she felt sorely at a loss to find any comforting words.

Colonel Anstruther's glance followed hers.

"Aye, look at it; 'tis a good likeness, they say; but what picture could give my boy's eyes? O Raymond! why could not your young life have been spared, and this old useless one of mine have gone instead? And yet they talk cant about a merciful Providence"——

A fierce, half-uttered blasphemy was arrested on his lips by the pale horror of the fair young face—by the trembling of the little fingers that grasped his own.

"Oh, hush! Raymond would grieve to hear you say such words."

And Austin silently blessed the courage which had dared to interfere where he had been hitherto silent.

The Colonel turned round, half angry, half amused, at the check he had received.

"What does a chit like you know of what Raymond would say or think? Yet maybe you are right;" and he took up for the twentieth

time a letter which only yesterday had come from Raymond's colonel, and had scarcely since left the father's hand.

It dwelt on the lad's many noble and promising qualities, his popularity with brother-officers and men, and the good influence his example had proved of late in the regiment. "Young as he was, his loss will be grievously felt. So strong a character was bound to exercise influence for good or ill, and of late there has been no question that the good preponderated. Like most youngsters, he was wild at first, but ever since his accident and poor Talbot's death, he has changed. The strong religious feeling which was the governing principle of his life has been productive of no small good to others—the more so that his genial, kindly, open-hearted temper ensured his constant popularity."

Phyllis' eyes dwelt wistfully on the letter with the Indian post-mark, and with a sudden impulse Colonel Anstruther put it into her hand.

Austin drew a chair nearer for her, glanced round to see that his uncle needed nothing, and left them together.

When he returned half an hour later (bearing a summons from Miss Hope, who sat waiting in the carriage for her sister), Phyllis was kneeling by the Colonel's side, talking to him in soft undertones of the old happy days when Raymond had been big brother, protector, and play-fellow to the little maidens at Hopedale.

He let her obey the summons without remark, only as, after resuming her hat, she lingered a moment wistfully by his side, he looked up and said briefly—"Do you care to come again? There's his picture to see. But no, no! why should you be bothered with a cross, lonely old wretch, for whom no one cares?"

"I will come, if you will let me," was the quiet answer.

And from that day forth, even as David cheered and soothed the dark hours of Saul's later days, the gentle girl ministered to the fierce, lonely old man, the light of whose eyes had been suddenly darkened.

Together, in the shortening wintry days, they read that precious letter of Mrs. Lindsay's, forwarded by Lady Talbot to the childless father. Together they spoke of Raymond, and it seemed as if indeed his son's spirit were permitted to

shed a brighter influence on his father's latter days; for, through Phyllis' means, he learned gradually to turn to the religion he had so long contemned, and in doubt and sorrow to grope after the repentance so long needed and put aside.

"Ought we to let her go on?" Margaret sometimes questioned. "Her strength often seems exhausted after these interviews. We are forgetting how frail she is."

"But it is the one joy of her life," Cicely would reply. "I know—for she told me—that she looks on the Colonel as dear Raymond's legacy, and that her great wish and prayer is that they may meet in a better world. It is as if Raymond's spirit were urging her on, begging her to save his father."

But in this late chosen mission Phyllis had not lost sight of her life-long project. A few months more and she would be of age, and the first stone of the church of "All Saints" could be laid at Walton Sudbury.

Colonel Anstruther had by slow degrees heard all her plans, and had grown interested in them for her sake.

Austin Blake was at Holmewood as often as

he could be spared from his London curacy, and his visits were generally a comfort to his uncle. Mrs. Blake's recent death had left her son without any immediate ties, and although Holmewood was entailed in the male line, it became evident that the Colonel intended to provide comfortably for his sister's son.

And by degrees, as the sisterly tie between herself and Raymond's favourite cousin strengthened, and all embarrassment between them was at an end, Phyllis was made aware of a secret, the knowledge of which gave her real happiness.

Still she kept her own counsel, only watching with loving eyes to see if help were needed, until the day when Cicely, weeping with shy, happy pride, came and threw her arms round her neck and whispered—"She was so happy, so happy, she did not think it could be true! There never was any one so good as Austin, and how should she learn ever to be worthy of him, and fit for a clergyman's wife!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A LIFE'S AIM FULFILLED.

“IT has come at last—the day for which our darling seems to have been living in faith and patience all these years. Thank God that she has been spared to see her hopes fulfilled!”

Four years had passed since those fatal tidings from India had reached that quiet English neighbourhood—years fraught with some eventful changes to the homes at Hopedale and Holmewood. Colonel Anstruther’s storm-tossed life had passed away—the weary spirit had laid its burden down; and it was Phyllis’ hand which had pointed the way to the Rest into which his son had entered, through the path of martyrdom.

By his wish, not many months later, a quiet wedding took place at Hopedale; and Austin Blake, now in full priest’s orders, carried off

gentle Cicely Hope to share his labours and cheer the humble home of his London curacy.

But the close town atmosphere had by degrees proved too trying for his health, and joyfully did Phyllis look forward to the day when the living of Walton Sudbury should be endowed, and presented to the brother-in-law whose work and ministrations among his old friends would indeed be a labour of love.

And now her life's work was nearly done, for the last completing touches had been put to the beautiful little church; and though the school and parsonage were yet unfinished, it was arranged that the consecration should not be delayed, and that from henceforth weekly services should take place at Walton Sudbury.

Who that was present could ever forget that consecration?

The service took place in the afternoon, and the August sun poured in a rich flood of gold and crimson through the western window, representing "that great multitude which no man could number . . . clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands."

Those who looked at the pale, slender girl

who had been the human means of this good work being carried out, could not repress the thought that ere long she too would be numbered among those blessed ones.

“She looks fitter for heaven than earth already,” murmured some of the villagers ; and with a terrible pang at her heart, but a struggle to rejoice in her darling’s gain, Margaret was fain to own that they were right.

Cicely was there—a happy young wife—thinking proudly how well her husband looked in his hood and surplice—how thoughtful and earnest was his countenance as he walked among his fellow-clergy.

But on Phyllis’ sweet face there was no trace of earthly thoughts.

Her head was raised, and her eyes fixed on the beautiful east window, representing our Lord’s Ascension into Heaven ; and in her heart was one fervent cry of thankfulness and joy.

Too weak to raise her voice, it yet seemed to her as if her very soul were joining in the hymn, which poured forth in heartfelt praise and rejoicing from every member of that assembly.

"When the Architect Almighty had created heaven and earth,
Temple of the glorious Godhead, angels shouted at their birth,
Morning stars in holy concert sang a joyful jubilee,
And the whole creation chanted, Alleluia, Lord, to Thee!"

It was over! The last prayer had been offered up—the blessing spoken. Slowly the congregation dispersed, only the Bishop and a few of the neighbouring clergy lingering around the Hopedale party, as they assembled in the porch.

Very kind and fatherly was the Bishop's manner to Phyllis. He had seen, and been told the history of, that nameless memorial stone—the first to be placed in the previously consecrated burial-ground surrounding the church. "The parting will be a short one," was the thought in the good man's mind, as he looked at the fair transparent face and marked the feeble movements.

"You can say your 'Thanksgiving' now, and wait God's good time in joyful hope," he said, as he pressed her hand.

"And my 'Nunc Dimittis' also," and Phyllis' own bright smile shone out as she felt the full meaning of the kind words. "There is not much to be done still—only

the school to finish, and the parsonage-house ; but Austin and Cicely are so good about waiting for that, and it is so sweet to have them with us."

"It may be God's will that you should be spared to see it all carried out," the Bishop said gently. "I should like to think of you, through many peaceful years, resting amid the blessing that attends such labours as yours."

She shook her head. "I don't know ; I am glad it is not in our hands to settle. It seems selfish to think of leaving these dear ones who will miss me—but oh ! the longing sometimes to flee away from it all and be at rest !"

Eight months more, and another village festival was eagerly looked forward to by the children of Walton Sudbury.

Easter was approaching, and the new school-house was to be opened on the Monday in Easter week.

Every spring flower on which the children could lay hands was in requisition, and especially white violets, known to be Miss Phyllis' favourite flower, and treasured up as offerings for her.

But the cold spring winds had done their

work, and the sweet blossom, which had struggled through winter frosts, bent beneath their destroying power. Even as the rosy tints in the east showed the rising of the Easter dawn, the summons came, suddenly to all but her, who had been so long prepared, and Phyllis Hope entered into the rest for which she had longed.

And then, as she had wished, they laid her near the stone she had herself caused to be erected in her lover's memory, and left her sleeping among the violets, until the last great day of reunion. Cicely, weeping soft tears, which almost were a kind of happiness, clung to her husband's arm as the voices of the village choir—the choir Phyllis had so loved to train and hear—rose in the Resurrection hymn, and Margaret turned once more to her desolate home, with the words yet ringing in her ears—

“To that brightest of all meetings
Bring us, Jesus Christ, at last ;
To Thy Cross through death and judgment
Holding fast.”

CONCLUSION.

It was, of course, only the mere outline of the foregoing tale which Mr. Blake, at an Easter-tide some twenty years later, related to his eager little daughter.

Many of the main facts she knew already—in early childish days her gentle mother had loved to dwell on “Aunt Phyllis,” and to make her name a cherished sound among her little ones.

But Cicely’s own life had been short, and her eldest girl was still a child when the quiet summons came, and, in the full certainty and joyful hope of a reunion, she quietly fell asleep, thanking God for her happy life, and leaving her husband and children to her elder sister’s care.

Well had that charge been fulfilled! As Maggie said, “Aunt Margaret” had been everything to the motherless family, and in her the clergyman had found a kindly comforter and fellow-labourer, ready to second all his efforts for the good of his people, and to relieve him

of the minor cares which so harass a busy and lonely man.

And so the years flitted quietly by ; and now, a solitary and aged woman, watching patiently on the banks of the river, over which those she loved best had long since passed, Margaret Hope awaited the summons to lay her burden down.

“It is like the three saints’ days after Christmas,” was Maggie’s comment on her father’s narrative. “Cousin Raymond passing, like St. Stephen, through the fiery trial to the crown of martyrdom ; dear mother and Aunt Phyllis entering into joy almost like the Holy Innocents, so pure and young and unsullied by the world ; and, like St. John, Aunt Margaret tarries patiently, through trial and sorrow and old age, content to wait and trust till God’s good time shall come.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Blake, “she has learned the great lesson, the secret of His Peace—

‘Thou may’st not choose,
Nor is it mine to give, for I am sent—
This be content to know—if thou art His,
Thy summons shall be surely unto peace,
If not in peace. Ever to each true soul
Patient in love, the end shall be the same.’”

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